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1

A Frightening Presence

The strange prickly feeling grew inside me as I walked slowly along the graveled

paths of my garden. It was deep twilight. The scent of early narcissus hung heavy in the air. What was it, I wondered, that made me so uneasy? I stopped my walk and looked around. Inside my home some distance across the broad lawn the servants were beginning to flick on lights in the dining area. Outside all seemed peaceful and quiet. I reached out to snip off some of the pungent white blossoms for my bedroom. As I leaned over to grasp the tall green stems, something brushed past my head. I straightened in alarm. What was it? A mist-like cloud— a cold, damp unholy presence—had floated by. The garden suddenly seemed darker. A chilling breeze sprang up through the weeping willows and I shivered. Get hold of yourself, Bilquis! I scolded. My imagination was playing tricks on me. Nevertheless, I gathered my flowers and headed quickly toward the house where windows glowed in warm reassurance. Its sturdy white walls and wooden doors offered protection. As I hurried along the crunchy gravel path I found myself glancing over my shoulder. I had always laughed at talk of the supernatural. Of course there wasn't anything out there. Was there? As if in answer, I felt a firm, very real and uncanny tap on my right hand. I screamed. I rushed into the house and slammed the door behind me. My servants ran to me, afraid to make any comment at all, for I must have looked like a ghost myself. It wasn't until bedtime that I finally found the courage to speak to my two maids about the cold presence. "Do you believe in spiritual things?" I asked, on concluding my story. Both Nur-jan and Raisham, one a Muslim, the other a Christian, avoided answer-

ing my question, but Nur-jan, her hands fluttering nervously, asked me if she could call the village mullah, a priest from the mosque, who would bring some holy water to cleanse the garden. But my common sense had returned and I rebelled at submitting to the superstition of the ignorant. Besides, I didn't want any word of this to spread in the village. I tried to smile at her concern, and told her, a little too abruptly I'm afraid, that I didn't want any holy man on my grounds pretending to remove evil spirits. Nevertheless, after the maids left the room, I found myself picking up my copy of the Quran. But after struggling through a few pages of the Muslim holy book, I wearied of it, slipped it back within its blue silken case, and fell asleep. I awakened slowly the next morning like a swimmer struggling to the surface, a thin, high chant piercing my consciousness: Laa ilaaha illa Ilaah, Muhammed resolu'lla! The sing-song words drifted through my bedroom window: There is no God but Allah: And Muhammed is his Prophet. It was a comforting sound, this Muslim call to prayer, because it seemed so utterly normal after the previous night. It was a call I had heard almost without exception every morning of my 54 years. I envisioned the source of the rolling chant. Some moments before in the little nearby Pakistani village of Wah, our old muezzin had hurried through the door at the base of an ancient minaret. Inside its cool interior he had trudged up curving stone steps worn smooth by the sandals of generations of Muslim holy men. At the top of the prayer tower, I could imagine

him hesitating at the carved teak door leading to the parapet to catch his breath.

Then, stepping outside to the railing, he threw back his bearded head and in syllables fourteen hundred years old called the faithful to prayer. Come to prayer, come to salvation, Prayer is better than sleep.

The haunting cry floating through the morning mist across cobblestone lanes in

Wah still cold from the October night drifted across my garden to curl along the

house's brick walls now ruddy in the light of the rising sun.

As the last wisps of the ancient chant hung above me, I remembered the eerie

experience in the garden the night before, and quickly turned to morning routines

that would be comforting just because they were so ordinary. I sat up and reached

for the bell on my bedside table. At its musical tinkle, my maid Nur-jan hurried in

out of breath as usual. Both of my maids slept in a room adjoining mine and I

knew that they had already been up for an hour, waiting for my call. Morning tea in

my bed was a must. Nur-jan began laying out my silver brushes and combs. She

was a willing teen-aged girl, plump and giggly, but a bit clumsy. When she dropped

a brush, I scolded her sharply.

Raisham, my other maid, older and quieter, a tall graceful woman, slid into the

room bearing a large covered tea tray. She placed it on my bed table, drew back the

white linen to expose the sterling service and poured me a cup of steaming tea.

Sipping the scalding ambrosia, I sighed in satisfaction; tea was better than

prayer. My mother would have been shocked at my thought.

How many times had

I watched her place her prayer rug on the tiled bedroom floor, then, facing the holy

city of Mecca, kneel and press her forehead to the rug in prayer. Thinking of my mother I looked over to the dressing case on my table. Fashioned centuries ago of sandalwood and covered with engraved sterling silver, it had belonged to Mother and her mother before her. Now it was my heirloom to treasure. After finishing two cups of tea I leaned forward, a sign for Raisham to begin brushing my graying waist-length hair while Nur-jan carefully worked on my nails. As the two worked, they gossiped in easy familiarity about news from the village, Nur-jan chattering and Raisham making quiet, thoughtful comments. They talked about a boy who was leaving home for the city and a girl soon to be married. And then they discussed the murder that happened in a town where Raisham's aunt lived. I could sense Raisham shudder as the news came up. For the victim had been a Christian. She was a young girl who had been staying in a Christian missionary's home. Someone had stumbled across her body in one of the narrow lanes criss-crossing her village. There was supposed to have been an investigation by the constabulary.

"Any news about the girl?" I casually asked.

"No, Begum Sahib," said Raisham quietly, as she carefully began to work a braid in my hair. I could understand why Raisham, a Christian herself, didn't want to talk about the murder. She knew as well as I did who had killed that girl. After all, the girl had forsaken her Muslim faith to be baptized a Christian. So the brother, infuriated by the shame this sin had brought upon his family, had obeyed the ancient law of the faithful that those who fall away from their faith must be slain.

Even though Muslim edicts may be stern and harsh, their interpretations are sometimes tempered with mercy and compassion. But there are always the zealots who carry out the letter of the Quranic law to the extreme. Everyone knew who had killed the girl. But nothing would be done. It had always been this way. A year ago, the Christian servant of one of the missionaries ended up in a ditch, his throat cut, and nothing had been done there either. I put the sad little story out of my mind and made ready to get up. My maids hurried to the closet and returned with several pairs of clothes for my selection. I pointed to an embroidered one, and after they helped me dress, they quietly left my room.

Sunlight now flooded my bedroom, giving its white walls and ivory-colored furnishings a saffron glow. The sunlight glinted from a silver-framed photograph on my dressing table and I stepped over and picked it up, angry, because I had put the picture face down the day before; one of the servants must have set it up again!

The engraved frame enclosed a photograph of a sophisticated-looking couple smiling at me from a corner table in a luxurious London restaurant. In spite of myself I looked at the picture again, as one does who keeps pressing a hurting tooth. The dashing man with dark mustache and burning eyes had been my husband, General Khalid Sheikh. Why did I keep this picture! Hate surged within me as I looked at the man I once felt I could not live without. When the photo had been taken six years before, Khalid had been Pakistan's Minister of Interior.

The glamorous-looking woman next to him had been me. As daughter of a conservative Muslim family that for four hundred years or more

had been landed
gentry, I had been hostess to diplomats and industrialists from
all over the world. I
had been accustomed to sojourns in Paris and London where I
spent my time
shopping on the Rue de la Paix or in Harrods. The lithesome
woman who smiled
from the photo no longer existed, I thought as I looked in the
mirror. The soft, pale
skin had bronzed, the lustrous black hair was now streaked
with gray, and disillusionment had etched deep lines in her face.
The world of the photograph had crumbled into fragments five
years before
when Khalid left me. Suffering the shame of rejection, I had
fled the sophisticated
life of London, Paris and Rawalpindi to seek refuge here in the
quiet peace of my
family's ancestral property nestled near the foothills of the
Himalayan Mountains.
This land contained the little country village of Wah where I
had spent so many
happy days as a child. The gardens and orchards had been
planted by many gener-
ations of my family and the big stone palatial home with its
tower, terraces and
huge echoing chambers seemed as old as the snow-crowned
mountains not far
away. My aunt lived in this house and so, desiring further
seclusion, I moved to a
smaller house built on the outskirts of Wah, which promised
the solace I needed.
It gave me even more. For when I arrived, much of the
extensive garden had be-
come overgrown. This was a blessing, for I buried much of my
sorrow in the lush
soil as I plunged into the restoration of the grounds. I made
some into formal flow-
er beds and left some of the area natural. Slowly the gardens,
with a natural musi-
cal spring, became my world until by then, the year 1966, I

had the reputation of a
recluse who secluded herself amongst her flowers.
I looked away from the silver-framed photo in my hand, placed
it face down
again on the table and turned to my bedroom window looking
toward the village.
Wah . . . the very name of the village was an exclamation of
joy. Centuries before,
when this was but a hamlet, the legendary Moghul emperor
Jehangir traveled
through here and his caravan stopped to rest by a spring. He
gratefully sank down
under a willow and exclaimed in joy, "Wah!" thus naming the
area forever.
But the memory of this scene gave me no release from the
unsettled feeling that
had been hovering over me ever since the strange experience
of the evening before.
However, I tried to dispel it as I stood at my window. It was
morning, a safe time
with familiar routines and warm sunlight. The previous night's
episode seemed as
real, but as remote, as a bad dream. I drew the white drapes
aside and breathed in
deeply of the fresh morning air, listening to the hissing of the
sweeper's broom on
the patio. A fragrance of wood smoke from early morning
cooking fires drifted up
to me and the rhythmic thumping of water-mill wheels sounded
in the distance. I
sighed in satisfaction. This was Wah, this was my home, this
was, after all, safety.
This was where Nawab Muhammad Hayat Khan, a feudal
landowner awarded "The
Star of India" by the British, had lived a hundred years or so
ago. My family was
known throughout India and Pakistan as the Hayats of Wah.
Centuries ago the
caravans of emperors would turn off the Grand Trunk Road to
visit my ancestors.
Even in my earlier days notables from all over Europe and Asia

would take the same road, once an ancient caravan route across India, to see my family. But now, usually only members of my family would follow it to my gate. Of course, this meant that I didn't see many people who were not part of my immediate household. I did not much care. My house servants were enough company. They and their ancestors had served my family for generations. Most important, I had Mahmud.

Mahmud was my four-year-old grandson. His mother, Tooni, was the youngest of my three children. A slim, attractive woman, Tooni was a medical doctor at Holy Family Hospital in nearby Rawalpindi. Her former husband was a prominent landlord. However, they had an unhappy marriage and their relationship deteriorated a little each year. During their long, bitter disagreements, Tooni would send Mahmud to visit me until she and her husband reached another uneasy truce. One day, Tooni and her husband came to see me. Could I keep one-year-old Mahmud for a while until they settled their differences?

"No," I said. "I do not want him to become a tennis ball. But I will be willing to adopt him and raise him as my own son."

Sadly, Tooni and her husband never could settle their differences and they finally divorced. However, they did approve my adopting Mahmud, and it was working out quite well. Tooni came to see Mahmud often and the three of us were very close, particularly since my two other children lived far away.

Later that morning Mahmud pedaled his tricycle across the brick terrace shaded by almond trees. He had been with me for over three years,

and this lively cherubic child with deep brown eyes and button nose was the only joy of my life. His pealing laughter seemed to lift the spirit of this secluded old house. Even so I worried about how he would be affected by living with such a downcast person as me. I tried to compensate by making sure his every need was anticipated, and this included his own servants, in addition to mine, to dress him, bring out his toys and pick them up when he was through playing with them. But I was troubled about Mahmud. For several days he had refused to eat. This was particularly strange, for the boy was always visiting the kitchen to cajole my cooks into giving him snacks. Earlier that morning I had walked through the terrazzo entranceway out to the terrace. After exchanging a warm hug with Mahmud, I asked his servant if the child had eaten. "No, Begum Sahib, he refuses," the maid said in a near whisper. When I pressed Mahmud to take some food, he just answered that he was not hungry. I was really disturbed when Nur-jan came to me alone and suggested timorously that Mahmud was being attacked by evil spirits. Startled, I looked at her sharply, remembering the disquieting experience of the night before. What did all this mean? Once again I asked Mahmud to eat, but to no avail. He wouldn't even touch his favorite Swiss chocolates that I had imported especially for him. His limpid eyes looked up to me when I offered him the package. "I'd love to eat them, Mum," he said, "but when I try to swallow it hurts." A cold chill ran through me as I looked at my little grandson, once so lively and now so listless.

I immediately summoned Manzur, my chauffeur, also a Christian, and ordered him to get the car out. Within an hour we were in Rawalpindi to visit Mahmud's doctor. The pediatrician examined Mahmud carefully and he reported that he could find nothing wrong. Fear chilled me as we rode back to the house. Looking at my little grandson sitting quietly beside me, I wondered. Could Nur-jan possibly be right? Was this something that went beyond the physical? Was it . . . something in the spirit world attacking him? I reached over and put my arm around the child, smiling at myself for entertaining such ideas. Once, I remembered, my father had told me about a legendary Muslim holy man who could perform miracles. I laughed aloud at the idea. My father was displeased, but that was the way I felt about any such claims. Still, today, holding Mahmud close as the car turned off the Grand Trunk Road onto our lane, I found myself toying with an unwelcome thought: Could Mahmud's problem be related to the mist in the garden? When I shared my fears with Nur-jan, her henna-tipped fingers flew to her throat and she begged me to call the village mullah and ask him to pray for Mahmud. I debated her request. Even though I believed in basic Muslim teachings, for several years I had drifted away from the many rituals, the praying five times a day, the fasting, the complicated ceremonial washings. But my concern for Mahmud overcame my doubts and I told Nur-jan that she could call the holy man from the village mosque. The next morning Mahmud and I sat impatiently awaiting the mullah. When I fi-

nally saw him making his way up the steps of the veranda, his thin, ragged coat flapping about him in the chilling fall wind, I was both sorry I had asked him and angry that he wasn't walking faster. Nur-jan brought the bony old man to my quarters, then withdrew. Mahmud watched the man curiously as he opened his Quran. The mullah, whose skin matched the ancient leather of his holy book, looked at me through crinkled eyes, laid a gnarled brown hand on Mahmud's head and in a quavering voice began reciting the Kul. This is the prayer every Muslim recites when he is about to begin any important act, whether to pray for the sick or to enter a business agreement. The mullah then started to read from the Quran in Arabic. The Quran is always read in Arabic since it would be wrong to translate the very words that God's angel had given the prophet Muhammad. I became impatient. I must have started to tap my foot. "Begum Sahib?" the mullah said, holding the Quran out to me. "You, too, should read these verses." He referred to the Sura Falak and Sura Naz, verses to be repeated when one is troubled. "Why don't you repeat these verses as well?" "No," I said, "I will not. God has forgotten about me and I have forgotten about God!" But at the hurt look on the old man's face I softened. After all, he had come here at my request and with Mahmud's welfare in mind. "All right," I said, taking the worn volume. I let it fall open, then read the first verse my eyes fell on: Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and those who are with him are hard

against the unbeliever. . . .

I thought of the Christian girl who had been murdered, and about the mist that appeared in my garden shortly after she was killed, and above all about Mahmud's mysterious ailment. Could they be related? Surely any angry spiritual power would never link me and Mahmud with a Christian. I shuddered. But the holy man seemed satisfied. Despite my reservations he returned for three days in a row to recite verses over Mahmud. And, just to complete the series of mysterious, unsettling events, Mahmud did get better. How was I supposed to think about all these happenings? I was soon to find out. For without knowing it, events had been set in motion that would shatter the world I'd known all my life.

2

The Strange Book

After these experiences I found myself drawn to the Quran. Perhaps it would help explain the events and at the same time fill the emptiness within me. Certainly its curved Arabic script held answers that had often sustained my family.

I had read the Quran before, of course. I remembered exactly how old I was when I first started learning Arabic so that I could read our holy book. This was the day every Muslim child began to unravel the Arabic script. I was four years, four months and four days old.

The moment was marked by a great family banquet, to which all my relatives came. It was then, in a special ceremony, that the wife of our village mullah began teaching me the alphabet.

I especially remember my Uncle Fateh (we children called him

Grand Uncle

Fateh; he wasn't really my uncle— all our kinsmen are called Uncle or Aunt in Pak-

istan). Grand Uncle Fateh was a relative very close to our family, and I remember

clearly how he watched me at the ceremony, his sensitive aquiline face glowing

with pleasure as I heard again the story of how the angel Gabriel began giving

Muhammad the words of the Quran on that fateful "Night of Power" in the year

610 A.D. It took me seven years to read the holy book through for the first time, but

when I finally finished, there was cause for yet another family celebration.

Always before, I had read the Quran as an obligation. This time, I felt I should re-

ally search its pages. I took my copy, which had belonged to my mother, relaxed on

the white eiderdown coverlet of my bed, and began to read. I started with the initial

verse, the first message given to the young prophet

Muhammad as he sat by himself in a cave on Mount Hira:

Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created,
Created Man of a blood clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, Who taught by the Pen, Taught

man that he knew not.

At first I was lost in the beauty of the words. But later on in the book there were

words that did not comfort me at all:

When ye have divorced women, and they have reached their term, then retain

them in kindness or release them in kindness.

My husband's eyes had been like black steel when he told me that he didn't love

me anymore. I shriveled inside as he spoke. What had happened to all our years to-

gether? Could they be dismissed just like that? Had I, as the Quran said, "reached

my term”?

The next morning I picked up the Quran again, hoping to find in the curling script the assurance I needed so desperately. But the assurance never came. I found only directives for how to live and warnings against other beliefs. There were verses about the prophet Jesus whose message, the Quran said, was falsified by early Christians. Though Jesus was born of a virgin, he was not God’s son. So say not, “Three,” warned the Quran against the Christian concept of the Trinity. Refrain; better is it for you. God is only one God. After several days of applying myself to the holy book, I put it down one afternoon with a sigh, got up and walked down to my garden where I hoped to find some peace in nature and in old memories. Even at this time of the year, the lush greenness persisted, brightened here and there by colorful zinnias that were still in bloom. It was a warm day for fall and Mahmud skipped along the paths where I had walked with my father. I could picture Father now, walking beside me, wearing his white turban, impeccably dressed in his conservative British suit. Often he would call me by my full name, Bilquis Sultana, knowing how much I enjoyed hearing it. For Bilquis was the first name of the Queen of Sheba and everyone knew Sultana signified royalty. We had many good conversations. And in later years we enjoyed talking about our new country, Pakistan. He was so proud of it. “The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was created especially as a homeland for the Muslims of India,” he said. “We’re one of the largest countries under Islamic law in the world,” he added,

pointing out that 96 percent of our country's population was Muslim, with the rest made up mostly of scattered groups of Buddhists, Christians and Hindus.

I sighed and looked up beyond my garden trees to the lavender hills in the dis-

tance. I could always find solace with my father. In his later years I had become a

companion to him, often discussing our country's rapidly changing political situ-

ation with him and explaining my views. He was so gentle, so understanding. But

now he was gone.

I remembered standing by his open grave in the Muslim cemetery of Brookwood

outside of London. He had traveled to London for surgery and had never recov-

ered. Muslim custom requires that a body be buried within 24 hours of death, and

by the time I reached the cemetery his coffin was ready to be lowered into the

grave. I couldn't believe I'd never see my father again. They unfastened the coffin

lid so I could have one last look at him. But the cold gray clay in that box was not

him; where had he gone? I stood there numbly wondering about it all as they refas-

tened the coffin, each shrill squeal of the screws biting into the damp wood, send-

ing pain through me.

Mother, with whom I was also very close, died seven years later, and now I felt

as if I was completely alone.

There in my garden, shadows had lengthened and again I stood in twilight. No,

the comfort I had sought in memories proved only to bring aches. Softly in the

distance I could hear the muezzin's sunset prayer call; its haunting strains only

deepened the loneliness within me.

"Where? O Allah," I whispered to the prayer rhythms, "where is

the comfort You
promise?"

Back in my bedroom that evening I again picked up my mother's copy of the Quran. And as I read I was again impressed by its many references to Jewish and Christian writings that preceded it. Perhaps, I wondered, I should continue my search among those earlier books? But that would mean reading the Bible. How could the Bible help since, of course, as everyone knew, the early Christians had falsified so much of it? But the idea of reading the Bible became more and more insistent. What was the Bible's concept of God? What did it say about the prophet Jesus? Perhaps after all I should read it.

But then came the next problem: Where would I get a Bible?

No shops in our area would carry one.

Perhaps Raisham would have a copy. But I dismissed the thought. Even if she did, my request would frighten her. Pakistanis have been murdered for even appearing to persuade Muslims to turn traitor-Christian. I thought of my other Christian servants. My family warned that I should not employ Christian servants because of their notorious lack of loyalty and untrustworthiness. But I didn't let that bother me; as long as they could fulfill their duties, I was satisfied. Doubtless they weren't very sincere anyhow. After all, when the Christian missionaries came to India, they found it easy to make converts among the lower classes. Most of these were the sweepers, people so low in the social order that their work was limited to cleaning the streets, walks and gutters, and we didn't want them working in our

homes. We Muslims called these servile ones "rice Christians." Wasn't that the reason they accepted a false religion, mainly to get the food, clothes and schooling the missionaries doled out? We looked upon the missionaries themselves with amusement; they busied themselves so eagerly over these poor creatures. In fact, only a few months before, my chauffeur, Manzur, asked if he could show my garden to some local missionaries who had admired it through the fence. "Of course," I said gratuitously, thinking of poor Manzur who evidently wanted so much to impress these people. A few days later from my drawing room window I watched the young American couple stroll through the garden. Manzur had referred to them as the Reverend and Mrs. David Mitchell. Both had brown hair, pale eyes and were wearing Western clothes. What colorless creatures, I thought. Even so, I did pass word on to the gardener to give these missionaries some seeds if they wished them. But thinking of them gave me my answer to getting a Bible. Manzur would get one for me. Tomorrow I would give him the assignment. So I summoned him the next morning. He stood at attention before me, the nervous twitch in his face making me uneasy, as it always did. "Manzur, I want you to get me a Bible." "A Bible?" His eyes widened. "Of course!" I said, trying to be patient. Since Manzur didn't know how to read, I was sure he didn't own a Bible. But I felt he could get one for me. When he mumbled something I could not understand, I repeated, simply but firmly, "Manzur, get me a Bible." He nodded, bowed and left. I knew why he was resisting my

request. Manzur was made of no firmer stuff than Raisham. They were both remembering that murdered girl. Giving a Bible to a sweeper was one thing; bringing a Bible to a person of the upper classes was quite something else. Word of this could get him into deep trouble indeed.

Two days later Manzur was driving me to Rawalpindi to see Tooni.

"Manzur, I do not have the Bible as yet."

I could see his knuckles whiten on the steering wheel.

"Begum, I will get you one."

Three days later I summoned him into the house.

"Manzur, I have asked you to bring me a Bible three times, and you have not."

The twitch in his face became more noticeable. "I'll give you one more day. If I do

not have one by tomorrow you will be fired."

His face turned ashen. He knew I meant it. He wheeled and left.

The next day just before a visit from Tooni, a little Bible mysteriously appeared

on my downstairs drawing room table. I picked it up and examined it closely.

Cheaply bound in a gray cloth cover, it was printed in Urdu. It had been translated

by an Englishman 180 years before and I found the old-fashioned phraseology diffi-

cult to follow. Manzur had evidently got it from a friend; it was almost new. I leafed

through its thin pages, set it down and forgot about it.

A few minutes later Tooni arrived. Mahmud ran in with great excitement because

he knew his mother would have brought him a toy. In a minute Mahmud raced

through the French doors to the terrace with his new airplane, and Tooni and I settled down to our tea.

It was then that Tooni noticed the Bible resting on the table near me. "Oh, a

Bible!" she said. "Do open it and see what it has to say."
Our family views any religious book as significant. It was a common pastime to allow a holy book to fall open and point blindly at a passage to see what it said, almost like having it give a prophecy.
Lightheartedly, I opened the little Bible and looked down at the pages.
Then a mysterious thing happened. It was as if my attention were being drawn to a verse on the lower right-hand corner of the right page. I bent close to read it:
"I will call that my people, which was not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called sons of the living God."
Romans 9:25–26
I caught my breath and a tremor passed through me. Why was this verse affecting me so! "I will call that my people, which was not my people. . . . In the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called sons of the living God."
A silence hung over the room. I looked up to see Tooni poised expectantly, ready to hear what I had found. But I could not read the words out loud. Something in them was too profound for me to read as amusement.
"Well, what was it, Mother?" asked Tooni, her alive eyes questioning me.
I closed the book, murmured something about this not being a game anymore, and turned the conversation to another subject.
But the words burned in my heart like glowing embers. And they turned out to be preparation for the most unusual dreams I have ever had.

The Dreams

It wasn't until evening that I again picked up the little gray Bible. Neither Tooni nor I referred to the Bible again after I switched the conversation to another subject. But throughout the long afternoon the words in that passage simmered just below the surface of my consciousness. That night I retired to my bedroom planning to read and meditate. I took the Bible with me and settled among the soft white pillows of my bed. Once again I leafed through its pages and read another puzzling passage: "But Israel, following the Law of righteousness, failed to reach the goal of righteousness."

Romans 9:31

Ah, I thought. Just as the Quran said; the Jews had missed the mark. The writer of these passages might have been a Muslim, I thought, for he continued to speak of the people of Israel as not knowing God's righteousness. But the next passage made me catch my breath. For Christ means the end of the struggle for righteousness-by-the-Law for everyone who believes in him.

Romans 10:4

I lowered the book down for a moment. Christ? He was the end of the struggle? I continued on.

For the secret is very near you, in your own heart, in your own mouth. . . . If you openly admit by your own mouth that Jesus Christ is the Lord, and if you believe in your own heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:8-9

I put the book down again, shaking my head. This directly contradicted the

Quran. Muslims knew the prophet Jesus was human, that he did not die on the cross but was whisked up to heaven by God and a look-alike put on the cross instead. Now sojourning in a lesser heaven, this Jesus will someday return to earth to reign for forty years, marry, have children and then die. In fact, I heard that there is a special grave plot kept vacant for the man's remains in Medina, the city where Muhammad is also buried. At the Resurrection Day, Jesus will rise and stand with other men to be judged before God Almighty. But this Bible said Christ was raised from the dead. It was either blasphemy or. . . .

My mind whirled. I knew that whoever called upon the name of Allah would be saved. But to believe that Jesus Christ is Allah? Even Muhammad, the final and greatest of the messengers of God, the Seal of the Prophets, was only a mortal.

I lay back on my bed, my hand over my eyes. If the Bible and Quran represent the same God, why is there so much confusion and contradiction? How could it be the same God if the God of the Quran is one of vengeance and punishment and the God of the Christian Bible is one of mercy and forgiveness? I don't know when I fell asleep. Normally I never dream, but this night I did. The dream was so lifelike, the events in it so real, that I found it difficult the next morning to believe they were only fantasy. Here is what I saw.

I found myself having supper with a man I knew to be Jesus. He had come to visit me in my home and stayed for two days. He sat across the table from me and in peace and joy we ate dinner together. Suddenly, the dream changed.

Now I was on a mountaintop with another man. He was clothed

in a robe and
shod with sandals. How was it that I mysteriously knew his
name, too? John
the Baptist. What a strange name. I found myself telling this
John the Baptist
about my recent visit with Jesus. "The Lord came and was my
guest for two
days," I said. "But now He is gone. Where is He? I must find
Him! Perhaps
you, John the Baptist, will lead me to Him?"
That was the dream. When I woke up I was loudly calling the
name, "John the
Baptist! John the Baptist!" Nur-jan and Raisham rushed into
my room. They
seemed embarrassed at my shouting and began fussily to
prepare my toilette. I
tried to tell them about my dream as they worked.
"Oh, how nice," giggled Nur-jan as she presented my tray of
perfumes.
"Yes, it was a blessed dream," murmured Raisham as she
brushed my hair.
I was surprised that as a Christian, Raisham wouldn't be more
excited. I started
to ask her about John the Baptist but checked myself; after all,
Raisham was just a
simple village woman. But who was this John the Baptist? I had
not come across
the name in what I had read so far in the Bible.
For the next three days I continued reading both the Bible and
the Quran side by
side, turning from one to the other. I found myself picking up
the Quran out of a
sense of duty, and then eagerly turning to the Christian book,
dipping into it here
and there to look into this confusing new world I had
discovered. Each time I
opened the Bible a sense of guilt filled me. Perhaps this
stemmed from my strict
upbringing. Even after I had become a young woman, Father
would have to ap-
prove any book I read. Once my brother and I smuggled a

book into our room.

Even though it was completely innocent, we were quite frightened, reading it.

Now as I opened the Bible, I found myself reacting in the same manner. One

story riveted my attention. It told of the Jewish leaders bringing a woman caught in

adultery to the prophet Jesus. I shivered, knowing what fate lay in store for this

woman. The moral codes of the ancient East were not very different from ours in

Pakistan. The men of the community are bound by tradition to punish the adul-

terous woman. As I read of the woman in the Bible standing before her accusers, I

knew that her own brothers, uncles and cousins stood in the forefront, ready to

stone her.

Then the Prophet said: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone (John 8:7).

I reeled as in my mind's eye I watched the men slink away.

Instead of super-

vising her lawful death, Jesus had forced her accusers to recognize their own guilt.

The book fell into my lap as I lay there deep in thought. There was something so

logical, so right about this prophet's challenge. The man spoke truth.

Then three days later I had a second strange dream:

I was in the bedchamber when a maid announced that a perfume salesman

was waiting to see me. I arose from my divan elated, for at this time there was

a shortage of imported perfumes in Pakistan. I greatly feared running low on

my favorite luxury. And so in my dream I happily asked my maid to show the

perfume salesman in.

He was dressed in the manner of perfume salesmen in my mother's day

when these merchants traveled from house to house selling

their wares. He
wore a black frock coat and carried his stock in a valise.
Opening the valise, he
took out a golden jar. Removing the cap, he handed it to me.
As I looked at it,
I caught my breath; the perfume glimmered like liquid crystal.
I was about to
touch my finger to it when he held up his hand.

"No," he said. Taking the golden jar he walked over and
placed it on my
bedside table. "This will spread throughout the world," he said.
As I awakened in the morning, the dream was still vivid in my
mind. The sun was
streaming through the window, and I could still smell that
beautiful perfume; its
delightful fragrance filled the room. I raised up and looked at
my bedside table, half
expecting to see the golden jar there.

Instead, where the jar had been, now rested the Bible!
A tingle passed through me. I sat on the edge of the bed
pondering my two
dreams. What did they mean? Where I had not dreamed in
years, now I had two
vivid dreams in a row. Were they related to each other? And
were they related to my
recent brush with the realities of the supernatural world?
That afternoon I went for my usual stroll in the garden. I was
still bemused by
my dreams. But now something else was added. It was as if I
felt a strange delight
and joy, a peace beyond anything I had ever known before. It
was as if I were close
to the Presence of God. Suddenly, as I stepped out of a grove
into a sun-flooded
open area, the air around me seemed to be alive with another
lovely fragrance. It
wasn't the fragrance of flowers—it was too late for any of the
garden to be in
bloom—but a very real fragrance nonetheless.

In some agitation I returned to the house. Where did that
fragrance come from?

What was happening to me? Who could I talk to about what was happening to me?

It would have to be someone with a knowledge of the Bible. I had already swept aside the thought of asking my Christian servants. In the first place it was unthinkable to ask information of them. They probably had never even read the Bible and wouldn't know what I was talking about. No, I had to talk to someone who was educated and who knew this book.

As I considered this question a shocking idea came to mind. That would be the last place I should go for help.

But a name kept returning to me so compellingly that I finally rang for Manzur.

"I want you to get the car out for me." And then as an afterthought I added: "I'll be driving myself."

Manzur's eyes widened. "Yourself?"

"Yes, myself, if you please." He left, reluctantly. Rarely had I taken my car out

that late in the day. I had been an officer in the Royal Indian Army women's division in World War II and had driven ambulances and staff cars thousands of miles

over all kinds of terrain. But wartime was one thing and even then I was in the com-

pany of someone. The daughter of a feudal family was not expected to drive her

own car in normal life, especially not at night.

But I knew I couldn't risk Manzur knowing what I was about to do and resultant

servants' gossip. I was convinced there was only one source where I could find the

answer to my questions: Who was John the Baptist? What was this fragrance all about?

So it was with extreme reluctance that evening that I headed for the home of a

couple I barely knew, the Reverend and Mrs. David Mitchell,

who had visited my
garden that summer. As Christian missionaries, they were the
last people with
whom I'd want to be seen.

4

The Encounter

My car idled in the driveway. Manzur stood at the driver's door
which he kept
closed until the last moment protecting the car's warmth
against the chill of that
autumn evening. His dark eyes were still questioning my
decision, but without
comment. I got into the warm car, settled behind the wheel
and drove off into the
twilight, the Bible on the seat beside me.

Everyone knew where everyone else lived in this village of
Wah. The Mitchells'
home stood near the entrance of the Wah cement works from
which my family de-
rived part of its income. It served as the center of a strange
little community about
five miles outside of town. The homes had been built as
temporary quarters for
British troops during World War II. I recalled from the few
times I had ventured
into the area that the drab, uniform houses had lost most of
their whitewash; their
tin roofs showed signs of much patchwork. A strange mixture
of expectancy and
fear filled me as I drove along. I had never been in a Christian
missionary home be-
fore. I was hopeful of learning the identity of my mystery man,
John the Baptist,
and yet I feared a certain—what should I call it, "influence?"—
from those who
might answer my question.

What would my forebears think of this visit to a Christian
missionary? I thought,
for instance, of my great-grandfather who had accompanied

the famed British General Nicholson through the Khyber Pass in one of the Afghanistan wars. What shame this visit would bring on my family! We had always associated the missionaries with the poor and social outcasts. I imagined a conversation with an uncle or aunt in which I defended myself by telling them of my strange dreams. "After all," I said in the scene I was playing out in my mind, "anyone would want to find out the meaning of such vivid dreams."

As I approached the Mitchells' area in the dim light of early evening, it was just as I remembered it, except that the look-alike bungalows seemed, if possible, even more drab. After searching up and down narrow lanes, I found the house near the cement works, just where I thought it would be, a small, whitewashed bungalow, sitting in a grove of shisham (rosewood) trees. As a precaution I started to park some distance away until I caught myself. I was being far too afraid of what my family thought. So I parked squarely in front of the house, picked up the Bible and moved quickly toward the front door. The yard, I noticed, was neat and the screened verandah well maintained. At least these missionaries kept their place in good repair.

Suddenly the house door opened and a group of chattering village women from the minority Christian community filed out, dressed in the typical shalwar qamiz, a loose pajama-like cotton outfit, with a dupatta, a head scarf. I stiffened. They would know me, of course; nearly everyone in Wah recognized me. Now the story would be gossiped all over the area that Begum Sheikh had visited a Christian missionary!

Sure enough, as soon as the women saw me in the light that came from the Mitchells' open front door, their chatter ceased abruptly. They hurried past me to the street, each touching hand to forehead in the traditional salute. There was nothing I could do but continue toward the door where Mrs. Mitchell stood staring out into the dusk.

Up close she looked just as I remembered her, having seen her at a distance about town, young, pale, almost fragile. Only now she was wearing a shalwar qamiz like the village women. As soon as she saw me her mouth fell open.

"Why, Begum Sheikh!" she exclaimed, "What? . . . But . . . come in," she said.

"Come in."

I was glad enough to step inside the house, away from the village women's eyes, which I knew would be fixed on my back. We went into the living room, small and simply furnished. Mrs. Mitchell drew up what appeared to be the most comfortable chair for me near the open fire. I glanced at the confusion in the middle of the room, which Mrs. Mitchell began to attend to.

She explained that she had just completed a Bible study with some local women.

Then she gave a nervous cough. "Would you like tea or coffee, Begum Sheikh?"

she said, brushing back her hair.

"Neither," I replied. "I have come to talk, not to drink tea." I looked about.

"Where is your husband?"

"He's on a trip to Afghanistan."

I was sorry. The woman standing before me was so young. Would she be able to answer my questions?

"Do you know anything about God?" I asked suddenly.

She sank down into one of the cane chairs and looked at me

strangely. The only noise in the room was the low hiss from the flames in the fireplace. Then she said quietly, "I'm afraid I don't know as much as my husband knows about God, but I do know Him."

What an extraordinary statement! How could a person presume to know God?

Just the same, the woman's odd confidence gave me confidence, too. Before I quite knew what was happening, I found myself telling her about my dream of the prophet Jesus and the man named John the Baptist. Strangely, I had difficulty controlling my voice as I related the experience. Even as I told her, I felt the same excitement I felt on that mountaintop. Then, after describing the dream, I leaned forward.

"Mrs. Mitchell, please tell me, who is John the Baptist?"

Mrs. Mitchell blinked at me and frowned. I felt she wanted to ask if I had really never heard of John the Baptist, but instead she settled back again in her chair.

"Well, Begum Sheikh, John the Baptist was a prophet, a forerunner of Jesus Christ, who preached repentance and was sent to prepare the way for Him. He was the one who baptized Jesus and who pointed to Jesus and said: 'Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'"

Why did my heart skip at the word baptized? I knew little about these Christians, but all Muslims had heard of their strange ceremony of baptism. My mind flitted to the many people who were murdered after their baptisms. And this also happened under British rule when supposedly there was freedom of religion. Even as a child I had put the two facts together: a Muslim was baptized, a Muslim died.

I looked up. How long had we been sitting there silently?

"That is what I was afraid of," I said.

"What were you afraid of?" she asked.

"I was afraid that John the Baptist was pointing me to Jesus. If

I choose Jesus, I

lose everything!

"Mrs. Mitchell," I continued, my throat tight, "forget I am a

Muslim. Forget the

problems we have with Jesus being called the Son of God.

Forget about our believ-

ing that the Bible has been changed. Just tell me one thing:

What has Jesus done

for you?"

The room was quiet again. Mrs. Mitchell seemed in no hurry to speak. Then she

told me what God had done for her and for the world by

breaking that dreadful

deadlock between sinful man and Himself by personally visiting this earth in the

flesh, as Jesus, and dying for all of us on the cross.

There was another long silence. Finally, hardly believing my own ears, I took a

breath and heard myself saying quite distinctly, "Mrs. Mitchell, some peculiar

things have been happening at our house lately. Events of the spirit. Good and

bad, both. I feel as if I were in the midst of an immense tug of war, and I need all

the positive help I can get. Could you pray for me?"

The woman appeared startled at my request. Then, collecting herself, she asked

if I wanted to stand up, kneel or sit down as we prayed. I

shrugged, suddenly horri-

fied. All were equally unthinkable. But there was this slender, youthful woman

kneeling on the floor. And I followed her!

"O Spirit of God," said Mrs. Mitchell in a soft voice, "O God, I know that noth-

ing I can say will convince Begum Sheikh who Jesus is. But I thank You that Your

Spirit can take the veil off our eyes and reveal Jesus to our

hearts. O Holy Spirit, do
this for Begum Sheikh. In Jesus' name. Amen."
"Yes, God, that is exactly what I want," I added.
We stayed on our knees for what seemed like forever. I was
glad for the silence,
for my heart was strangely warmed. At last Mrs. Mitchell and I
arose.

"Is that a Bible, Begum Sheikh?" she asked, nodding toward
the little gray volume that I clutched to my breast in one hand.

I showed her the book.

"How do you find it?" she asked. "Easy to understand?"

"Not really," I said. "It is an old translation and I am not at
home in it."

She stepped into an adjacent room and returned with another
book.

"Here is a New Testament written in modern English," she said.

"It's called the
Phillips translation. I find it much easier to understand than
others. Would you like
it?"

"Yes," I said, not hesitating. "Thank you. And now I think I've
taken too much of
your time."

"Start with the Gospel of John," Mrs. Mitchell advised, opening
the book and
placing a bit of paper in it as a bookmark. "That's another
John, but he makes the
role of John the Baptist very clear."

Then she told me a story from the Bible about wise men from
the East who had
sought and worshiped the Messiah, then had a dream to avoid
Herod, the Gentile
ruler, on their return home.

"God does speak in dreams, then!" I exclaimed. "If the Bible
tells about God
speaking in dreams, then I know He has spoken to me in my
dream. I don't usually
dream, Mrs. Mitchell, but I had another dream that I don't
understand. I know it
has something to do with Jesus, too."

My other dream about the perfume salesman seemed so . . .
bizarre. But as had
happened several times already in this strange evening, I
found myself filled with a
boldness that seemed almost to come from outside of me, and
I told her about my
dream and asked if she could explain this dream for me.
She thought for a moment. "I can't think of an explanation
right now, Begum
Sheikh, but I'll pray and ask God to show me."
As I drove home, I experienced for the second time that same
fragrant Presence I
had sensed in my garden earlier that day!
When I got home that night, I read a little out of the portion of
the Bible called
the gospel of John, in which the writer talked about John the
Baptist. This strange
man clad in camel hair, who came out of the wilderness, calling
people to prepare
for the coming of the Lord. And then, there in the safety of my
own bedroom, seat-
ed on my divan, surrounded by memories and traditions that
were four or more
centuries old, a thought slipped sideways into my mind,
unbidden, unwanted,
quickly rejected. If John the Baptist was a sign from God, a
sign pointing toward
Jesus, was this same man pointing me toward Jesus, too?
Of course the thought was untenable. I put it out of mind and
went to sleep.
That night I did sleep soundly.
As the muezzin called me to prayer the next morning, I was
relieved to find my-
self seeing things clearly again. What a bizarre series of
thoughts I had toyed with
in the night! But now as the muezzin reminded me where truth
lay, I felt secure
again, away from these disturbing Christian influences.
Raisham came in just then, not with tea but with a note, which
she said had just
been delivered to the house.

It was from Mrs. Mitchell. All it said was: "Read Second Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 14."

I reached for the Bible she had given me and searched until I found the chapter and verse. Then, as I read, I caught my breath: Thanks be to God who leads us, wherever we are, on Christ's triumphant way, and makes our knowledge of Him spread throughout the world like a lovely perfume!

I sat there in bed and reread the passage, my composure of a minute ago shattered. The knowledge of Jesus spreads like a lovely perfume! In my dream, the salesman had put the golden dish of scent on my bedside table and said that the perfume "would spread throughout the world." The next morning I had found my Bible in the same spot where the perfume had been laid! It was all too clear. I didn't want to think about it anymore. Ring for tea, that's what I must do. Ring for my tea and bring life back into its proper focus quickly before something else went awry.

Even though Mrs. Mitchell had invited me back, I felt it best not to return. It seemed a prudent, logical decision that I must now investigate this Bible on my own. I did not want to be pushed by any outside influence. However, one afternoon Nur-jan rushed into my room with an odd look in her eyes. "The Padri Sahib and Mrs. Mitchell are here to see you," she gasped.

My hand flew to my throat. Why would they come here? However, quickly composing myself, I asked the maid to bring them into the drawing room.

David Mitchell, a lanky man with crinkly eyes, radiated the same friendly warmth

as his wife. The two seemed so happy to see me that I forgot my discomfort over them coming to my house.

Mrs. Mitchell started to shake hands, then at the last minute threw her arms around me instead. I was stunned. No one outside the family, not even our closest friends, had ever embraced me in this way before. I stiffened but Mrs. Mitchell appeared to take no notice of my reaction. I found— in retrospect, I have to admit—that this display pleased me. There could have been no sham in her greeting.

"I'm so happy to meet 'the Flower Lady,'" David exclaimed in a jovial American accent.

I glanced at Mrs. Mitchell and she laughed. "I should explain. When you came to our house, I wanted to let David know right away by telegram for we had often talked about you since we visited your garden last spring. However, I didn't want to use your real name, to protect you. As I was wondering how to refer to you in the wire, I glanced out my window and saw the flowers that had grown from the seeds your gardener gave us. The name came to me, 'Flower Lady,' and that became our code name for you."

I laughed. "Well, from now on, you can call me Bilquis."

"And please," she said, "call me Synnøve."

It was a strange visit. I suppose I was half-expecting pressure from the Mitchells to accept their religion, but nothing of the sort occurred. We drank a cup of tea and chatted and at this time I did question Jesus being called the "son of God," for to Muslims there is no greater sin than to make this claim. The Quran states again and again that God has no children.

"And this 'trinity'?" I asked. "God is three?"

In answer, David compared God to the sun that manifests itself in the three creative energies of heat, light and radiation, a trinity relationship that together makes the sun, yet singly is not the sun. And then shortly afterward they left.

Again for several days I found myself alone with two books—the Quran and the Bible. I continued to read them both, studying the Quran because of the loyalty of a lifetime, delving into the Bible because of a strange inner hunger.

Yet, sometimes I'd draw back from picking up the Bible. God couldn't be in both books, I knew, because their messages were so different. But when my hand hesitated at picking up the book Mrs. Mitchell gave me, I felt a strange letdown. For the past week I had been living in a world of beauty, not a visible garden created by me from seeds and water, but an inner garden created from a new spiritual awareness.

I first entered this world of beauty by way of my two dreams. Then I became aware of this world a second time on the night I met the indefinably glorious Presence in my garden. And I had known it once again when I obeyed the nudging that prompted me to visit the Mitchells.

Slowly, clearly, over the next few days I began to know that there was a way to return to my world of beauty. And reading this Christian book seemed, for reasons that I could not grasp, the key to my reentering that world. And then one day little Mahmud came up to me holding the side of his head and trying not to whimper.

"My ear, Mum," he cried in a pain-filled voice. "It hurts." I bent down and examined him carefully. His usual ruddy brown complexion had paled, and although Mahmud was not a child to complain, I

could see the tear
stains on his little round tan cheeks.
I put him right to bed and crooned softly to him, his black hair
too stark against
the pillow. And then, after his eyes closed, I went to the
telephone and rang the
Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi. Within a minute Tooni was
on the phone. She
agreed that we should check Mahmud into the hospital the next
afternoon for a
complete examination the following day. I would be able to
stay in a room adjoin-
ing hers and a maid would be given a smaller room adjacent to
that.

It was toward evening when we checked into the comfortable
arrangement.

Tooni had the evening free to spend with us. Soon, Mahmud
and his mother were
giggling over some pictures Mahmud was coloring in a book
she had brought him.

I was propped up in bed reading my Bible. I had also brought
the Quran with me,
but by now I read the Quran out of a sense of duty, more than
interest.

Suddenly, the room lights flickered, and then went out. The
room was dark.

"Another power failure," I said, exasperated. "Did you see any
candles?"

In a moment the door opened and a nun stepped inside with a
flashlight. "I

hope you don't mind the dark," she said cheerily. "We'll get
some candles shortly."

I recognized her as Dr. Pia Santiago, a slightly built,
bespectacled Filipino who
was in charge of the whole hospital. We had met briefly on a
previous visit. Almost

at once another nun came in with candles and in a moment
warm light flooded the

room. Mahmud and Tooni resumed their coloring and I was left
to make conver-

sation with Dr. Santiago. I couldn't help notice her staring at

my Bible.

"Do you mind if I sit with you for a while?" Dr. Santiago asked.

"It would be a pleasure," I said, assuming it was just a

courtesy visit. She moved

a chair near my bed and with a rustling of her white habit sat down.

"Oh," she said, taking off her glasses and wiping her brow with a handkerchief,

"has this ever been a busy night."

My heart warmed to her. Muslims always had respect for these holy women who

give up the world to serve their God; their faith may be

misplaced, but their sin-

cerity was real. We chatted, but as the conversation continued,

I could tell that this

woman had something on her mind. It was the Bible. I could

see her glancing at it

with mounting curiosity. Finally she leaned forward and in a

confidential tone

asked, "Begum Sheikh, what are you doing with a Bible?"

"I am earnestly in search of God," I answered. And then, while the candle burned

lower, I told her, very cautiously at first, then with mounting

boldness, about my

dreams, my visiting with Mrs. Mitchell, and my comparing the

Bible and the

Quran.

"Whatever happens," I emphasized, "I must find God, but I'm confused about

your faith." I realized that even as I spoke I was putting my

finger on something

important. "You seem to make God so . . . I don't know . . .

personal!"

The little nun's eyes filled with compassion and she leaned forward.

"Begum Sheikh," she said, her voice full of emotion, "there is only one way to

find out why we feel this way. And that is to find out for

yourself, strange as that

may seem. Why don't you pray to the God you are searching

for? Ask Him to show

you His way. Talk to Him as if He were your friend.”
I smiled. She might as well suggest that I talk to the Taj Mahal. But then Dr. Santiago said something that shot through my being like electricity. She leaned closer and took my hand in hers, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Talk to Him,” she said very quietly, “as if He were your father.”
I sat back quickly. A dead silence filled the room. Even Mahmud and Tooni’s conversation hung between thoughts. I stared at the nun with the candlelight glinting off her glasses.
Talk to God as if He were my father! The thought shook my soul in the peculiar way truth has of being at once startling and comforting. Then as if on cue everyone started talking at once. Tooni and Mahmud laughed and decided that the parasol should be colored purple. Dr. Santiago smiled, rose, wished us all well, gathered her habit about her and left the room.
Nothing else was said about prayer or Christianity. Yet I moved through the rest of that night, and the next morning, stunned. What made the experience especially mysterious was that the doctors could find nothing wrong with Mahmud and Mahmud kept saying that his ear did not hurt him one bit. At first, I was irritated at all the time and trouble this had taken. Then the thought occurred to me that perhaps, just perhaps, in some mystic way God had taken advantage of this situation to bring me into contact with Dr. Santiago.
Later that morning Manzur drove us all back to Wah. As we turned off the Grand Trunk onto our lane, I could see the roof of my home through the trees. Usually, I looked forward to home as a retreat from the world. But today there seemed to be a

difference about my house, as if something special would happen to me there.

We drove up the lane, Manzur sounding the horn. The servants ran out and surrounded the car. "Is the little one well?" they all asked at once. Yes, I assured them, Mahmud was fine. But my mind was not on homecoming formalities. It was on this new way to find God. I went to my bedroom to consider all that had been happening. No Muslim, I felt certain, ever thought of Allah as his father. Since childhood, I had been told that the surest way to know about Allah was to pray five times a day and study and think on the Quran. Yet Dr. Santiago's words came to me again. "Talk to God. Talk to Him as if He were your father."

Alone in my room I got on my knees and tried to call Him "Father." But it was a useless effort and I straightened in dismay. It was ridiculous. Wouldn't it be sinful to try to bring the Great One down to our own level? I fell asleep that night more confused than ever.

Hours later I awoke. It was after midnight, my birthday, December 12. I was 54 years old. I felt a momentary excitement, a carryover from childhood when birth-days were festivals with brass bands on the lawns, games and relatives coming to the house all day. Now, there would be no celebration, perhaps a few phone calls, nothing more.

Oh, how I had missed those childhood days. I thought of my parents as I liked to remember them best. Mother, so loving, so regal and beautiful. And Father. I had been so proud of him, with his high posts in the Indian government. I could still see him, impeccably dressed, adjusting his turban at the mirror before leaving

for his office. The friendly eyes under bushy brows, the gentle smile, the chiseled features and aquiline nose.

One of my cherished memories was seeing him at work in the study. Even in a society where sons were more highly regarded than daughters, Father prized his children equally. Often, as a little girl, I would have a question to ask him and I would peek at him from around the door of his office, hesitant to interrupt. Then his eye would catch mine. Putting down his pen, he would lean back in his chair and call out, "Keecha?" Slowly, I would walk into the study, my head down. He would smile and pat the chair next to his. "Come, my darling, sit here." Then, placing his arm around me, he would draw me to him. "Now, my little Keecha," he would ask gently, "what can I do for you?"

It was always the same with Father. He didn't mind if I bothered him. Whenever I had a question or problem, no matter how busy he was, he would put aside his work to devote his full attention just to me.

It was well past midnight as I lay in bed savoring this wonderful memory. "Oh, thank You . . ." I murmured to God. Was I really talking to Him?

Suddenly, a breakthrough of hope flooded me. Suppose, just suppose God were like a father. If my earthly father would put aside everything to listen to me, wouldn't my heavenly Father. . . ?

Shaking with excitement, I got out of bed, sank to my knees on the rug, looked up to heaven and in rich new understanding called God "my Father."

I was not prepared for what happened.

The Crossroads

"O Father, my Father . . . Father God."

Hesitantly, I spoke His name aloud. I tried different ways of speaking to Him.

And then, as if something broke through for me I found myself trusting that He was indeed hearing me, just as my earthly father had always done.

"Father, O my Father God," I cried, with growing confidence.

My voice seemed

unusually loud in the large bedroom as I knelt on the rug beside my bed. But sud-

denly that room wasn't empty any more. He was there! I could sense His Presence.

I could feel His hand laid gently on my head. It was as if I could see His eyes, filled

with love and compassion. He was so close that I found myself laying my head on

His knees like a little girl sitting at her father's feet. For a long time I knelt there,

sobbing quietly, floating in His love. I found myself talking with Him, apologizing

for not having known Him before. And again came His loving compassion, like a

warm blanket settling around me.

Now I recognized this as the same loving Presence I had met that fragrance-

filled afternoon in my garden. The same Presence I had sensed often as I read the

Bible.

"I am confused, Father," I said. "I have to get one thing straight right away." I

reached over to the bedside table where I kept the Bible and the Quran side by

side. I picked up both books and lifted them, one in each hand. "Which, Father?" I

said. "Which one is Your book?"

Then a remarkable thing happened. Nothing like it had ever occurred in my life

in quite this way. For I heard a voice inside my being, a voice

that spoke to me as
clearly as if I were repeating words in my inner mind. They
were fresh, full of kind-
ness, yet at the same time full of authority.
In which book do you meet Me as your Father?
I found myself answering: "In the Bible." That's all it took. Now
there was no
question in my mind which one was His book. I looked at my
watch and was
astonished to discover that three hours had passed. Yet I was
not tired. I wanted to
go on praying, I wanted to read the Bible, for I knew now that
my Father would
speak through it. I went to bed only when I knew I must for
the sake of my health.
But the very next morning I told my maids to see that I was
not disturbed, took my
Bible again and reclined on my bed. Starting with Matthew, I
began reading the
New Testament word by word.
I was impressed that God spoke to His people in dreams, five
times in the first
part of Matthew, in fact! He spoke to Joseph on behalf of Mary.
He warned the
wise men about Herod, and three more times He addressed
Joseph concerning the
protection of the Baby Jesus.
I couldn't find enough time for the Bible. Everything I read, it
seemed, was di-
recting me to take some kind of closer walk with God.
I found myself standing at a great crossroads. So far I had
met, personally, the
Father God. In my heart I knew I had to give myself totally to
His Son Jesus or else
turn my back on Him completely.
And I knew for certain that everyone I loved would advise me
to turn my back on
Jesus. Into my mind crowded the memory of a special,
precious day years before
when my father took me to our family mosque, just the two of
us. We stepped into

the soaring vaulted chamber. Taking my hand, Father told me with great pride and with strong identification that many generations of our family had worshiped there.

"What a privilege you have, my little Keecha, to be part of this ancient truth."

And I thought of Tooni. Surely this young woman had enough worries already.

And there were my other children; although they lived far away, they too would be

hurt if I "became a Christian." And then there was my Uncle Fateh, who had

watched so proudly the day I was four years, four months, four days old and began

learning to read the Quran. And there was beloved Aunt Amina and all my other

relatives, some hundred "uncles," "aunts" and "cousins." In the East, the family

becomes biraderi, one community, with each member responsible to the other. I

could hurt the family in many ways, even interfere with the opportunities of my

nieces getting married, as they would have to live in the shadow of my decision if I

chose to join the "sweepers."

But most of all I worried about my little grandson, Mahmud; what would happen

to him? My heart caught at the thought of Mahmud's father. He was a very volatile

man who might easily try to take the boy from me if I became a Christian, therefore

clearly demonstrating that I was unstable.

That day as I sat reading and thinking in my quiet room, these thoughts seared

my heart. Suddenly, the realization of the pain I might inflict on others became too

much for me and I stood up, crying. I threw a wrap around me and walked into the

cold, winter garden, my refuge where, it seemed, I could think best.

"O Lord," I cried, as I paced the graveled path, "could You

really want me to
leave my family? Can a God of love want me to inflict pain on
others?" And in the
darkness of my despair, all I could hear were His words, the
words I had just read
in Matthew:

"Anyone who puts his love for father or mother above his love
for me does
not deserve to be mine, and he who loves son or daughter
more than me is
not worthy of me. . . ."

Matthew 10:37-38

This Jesus did not compromise. He did not want any
competition. His were
hard, uncomfortable words, words I did not want to hear.
Enough! I couldn't take the pressure of the decision any longer.
On impulse I

ran back to the house, summoned Manzur and announced to
the somewhat star-
tled maidservant that I was going to Rawalpindi. I would be
gone for a few days.

She could reach me at my daughter's if there were need.

Manzur drove me into

Rawalpindi, where I did spend several days feverishly
shopping, buying toys for

Mahmud, perfumes and clothes for myself. Not surprisingly, as
I continued my

spree, I found myself drifting away from the warmth of His
Presence. Once when a

shopkeeper spread out a piece of cloth and showed me the
richly embroidered de-

sign, I suddenly saw the shape of the cross in the pattern. I
snapped at the shop-

keeper and fled. The next morning I went back to Wah neither
determined to re-

main a Muslim nor determined to become a Christian.

Then one evening as I relaxed before the fire, I found myself
picking up the Bible

again. Mahmud was in bed. It was quiet in the living room. A
wind in the garden

rattled the windows; the fire snapped and hissed.

I had read straight through all the gospels and the book of Acts, and that night I had reached the last book in the Bible. I was fascinated by Revelation, even though I understood very little of it. I read as if directed, strangely confident. And then abruptly I came to a sentence that made the room spin. It was the 20th verse of the third chapter of Revelation:

"See, I stand knocking at the door. If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will go into his house and dine with him, and he with me."

And dine with Him, and He with me!

I gasped, letting the book fall in my lap. This was my dream, the dream where

Jesus was having dinner with me! At the time I had had no knowledge of a book called Revelation. I closed my eyes and once again I could see Jesus sitting across the table from me. I could feel His warm smile, His acceptance. Why, the glory was there too! Just as it had been with the Father. It was the glory that belonged to His Presence!

Now I knew that my dream had come from God. The way was clear. I could accept Him, or reject Him. I could open the door, ask Him to come in permanently, or I could close the door. I would have to make my full decision now, one way or the other.

I made up my mind and knelt in front of the fire.

"O God, don't wait a moment. Please come into my life. Every bit of me is open to You." I did not have to struggle or worry about what would happen. I had said

yes. Christ was in my life now, and I knew it.

How unbearably beautiful. Within a few days I had met God the Father and God

the Son. I got up and went to bed, my mind whirling. Did I

dare take one more
step? I remembered that in the book of Acts, at Pentecost,
Jesus had baptized His
followers with the Holy Spirit. Was I supposed to follow this
same pattern?
"Lord," I said, as I laid my head back on my pillow, "I have no
one to guide me
except You Yourself. If You intend for me to receive this
baptism in the Holy Spirit,
then of course I want what You want. I am ready." Knowing I
had placed myself
completely in His hands, I drifted off to sleep.
It was still dark when I was awakened in a state of vibrant
expectancy that morn-
ing of December 24, 1966. I looked at my luminescent clock
and the hands pointed
to 3:00 A.M. The room was bitterly cold but I was burning with
excitement.
I crawled out of bed and sank to my knees on the cold rug. As
I looked up, I
seemed to be looking into a great light. Hot tears flowed down
my face as I raised
my hands to Him and cried out, "O Father God, baptize me
with Your Holy Spirit!"
I took my Bible and opened it to where the Lord said:
"John used to baptize with water, but before many days are
passed you will be
baptized with the Holy Spirit."
Acts 1:5
"Lord," I cried, "if these words of Yours are true, then give this
baptism to me
now." I crumpled face down on the chilled floor where I lay
crying. "Lord," I
sobbed, "I'll never want to get up from this place until You give
me this baptism."
Suddenly, I was filled with wonder and awe. For in that silent,
pre-dawn room I
saw His face. Something surged through me, wave after wave
of purifying ocean
breakers, flooding me to the tips of my fingers and toes,
washing my soul.

Then the powerful surges subsided, the heavenly ocean quieted. I was completely cleansed. Joy exploded within me and I cried out praising Him, thanking Him.

I felt the Lord lift me to my feet. He wanted me to get up now. I looked out the windows and saw that it was nearly dawn.

"O Lord," I said, as I lay back in my bed. "Could the heaven you speak of be any better than this? To know You is joy, to worship You is happiness, to be near You is peace. This is heaven!"

I doubt if I slept two hours that early dawn. In no time at all my maidservants came in to help me dress. For the first morning that I could remember, I did not say one cross word to them. Instead there was an air of calm and peace in the sun-flooded room. Raisham actually hummed a song as she brushed my hair, something she had never done before.

All that day I roamed through my house, silently praising God, hardly able to

contain the joy within myself. At lunch, Mahmud looked up from his pancakes and

said: "Mum, you look so smiley; what has happened to you?"

I reached over and tousled his shiny black hair. "Give him some halwa," I told

the cook. This dish made from wheat, butter and sugar was his favorite sweet. I

told Mahmud that we would be celebrating Christmas at the Mitchells' home.

"Christmas?" said Mahmud.

"It's a holiday," I said, "a little like the Eid after Ramazan."

That, Mahmud did

understand. Ramazan was the month of the Muslim year when Muhammad re-

ceived his first revelation. So for this month, each year, Muslims fast from sunrise

to sunset each day until at last the drums thunder in the

streets and we break our
fast with dates, sweet and sour fruit, spinach leaves dipped in
batter and fried, delicately cooked eggplant, succulent kababs.
Eid marks the end of Ramazan and is celebrated by special
prayers, visiting family and friends and exchanging gifts. Christmas I supposed
would indeed be a little
like that. And I was right. When David met us at the door of
the Mitchells' house,
the scent of delicious cooked foods floated around him, and
laughter sounded
from within the room.
"Come in! Come in!" he exclaimed, drawing us into the living
room filled with a
holiday spirit. A Christmas tree glowed in the corner and the
laughter of the two
Mitchell children, one just a little older, the other younger than
Mahmud, rang out
from another room. Mahmud happily joined them at their play.
I could not contain my joy any longer. "David!" I cried, using
his first name without thinking, "I am a Christian now! I have been baptized in
the Holy Spirit!"
He stared at me for a moment, then drew me into the house.
"Who told you
about the Holy Spirit baptism?" he asked, his blue eyes wide.
He began laughing
joyously and praising God. Hearing his "Hallelujah!" Synnøve
rushed into the
room from the kitchen and David again asked, "Who told you?"
"Jesus told me," I laughed, and held up my Bible. "I read it in
Acts 1:8. I said to
Jesus, 'If Your disciples—who walked with You, who talked with
You, who could
reach out and touch You—needed the baptism of the Holy
Spirit, how much more
do I, a lonely woman in this village, need to be filled with your
Holy Spirit!'"
Both David and Synnøve looked bewildered. But then suddenly
they rushed to

me. Synnøve put her arms around me and broke into tears. David joined her. Then the three of us stood there, arms around each other, praising God for what He had done.

That night I began a diary into which I put all the wonderful things the Lord had been doing for me. If I should die—and I had no idea what might happen to me once word got out that I had become a Christian—at least I wanted this record of my experience to remain. As I sat at my desk writing my experiences, I did not realize that He was making preparations to begin my education.

6

Learning to Find His Presence

Several surprises were waiting for me over the next several days, following my threefold encounters.

For one thing, I found I was experiencing dreams or visions, but quite unlike the two dreams that had started this whole incredible adventure. In fact my first experience left me shaken. I was resting in bed one afternoon thinking of my Lord when suddenly I felt as if I were floating right out my window. I felt sure I was not asleep and found myself passing right through the window, and I caught a glimpse of the earth below. I became so frightened that I cried out in fear, and suddenly I found myself back in bed. I lay there slightly dazed, breathing shallowly, feeling a tingling in my legs as if they had been asleep, and then the blood was rushing back.

"What is it, Lord?" I asked. And then I realized that He had given me a special experience. "I'm so sorry, Lord," I apologized, "but You have picked up a coward."

Late that night it happened again. Only this time I talked to God through the experience and told Him I wasn't afraid. As I slipped back through my window I could only think I had been "floating" in a spiritual way. "But what is Your reason, my Lord?" I asked. Turning to the Bible I searched His Word for something of this, for I began to fear that it might be something not of the Lord. I sighed in relief when I read in the Acts of the Apostles (8:39) when the Spirit of the Lord suddenly whisked Philip away to the distant city of Azotus after he had baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. Then I was given further confirmation when I read Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth. In chapter 12, in speaking of visions and revelations from the Lord, he wrote of being "caught up into the third heaven." He felt that only God knew whether or not it was an actual physical experience, and I felt the same about mine. As Paul added: "This man heard words that cannot be translated into human speech." I heard words, too, that I cannot translate but I shall never forget the scenes. During one such experience I saw a steeple soaring into heaven; suddenly before me were hundreds of churches, new ones, old ones, churches with different architectural styles, and then a beautiful gold church. Again the scene shifted and I saw downtown areas of cities rolling before me, modern centers and old-fashioned village squares. It was all so clear; I could discern the skyscrapers, clock towers and quaint ornate buildings. Then my heart shook as I saw a man riding a red horse, his right hand wielding a

sword; he galloped about the earth under cloud masses. Sometimes he rose until his head touched the clouds, and sometimes his steed's flashing hooves scraped the earth.

I couldn't get over the feeling that these must have been given to me for a particular, still unknown, reason.

I also found as I read the Scriptures that it was an experience completely unlike any other time I had spent with the Bible. Something happened to me as I went through the book; instead of reading the Bible, I found myself living it. It was as if I stepped through its pages into that ancient world of Palestine when Jesus Christ walked the stony roads of Galilee. I watched as He preached and taught, as He lived out His message in everyday situations, as He displayed the power of the Spirit and finally as He went to the cross and passed victoriously through the experience of death.

I also discovered to my surprise that the effect of Bible reading was beginning to be felt by others. This was brought home to me one morning when my maids were preparing my toilette. Nur-jan was arranging the silver combs and brushes on a tray when she accidentally spilled the whole thing. There was a great clatter. She stiffened, her eyes wide; I knew she was expecting my usual onslaught. And indeed

I was about to scold her when I caught myself. Instead, I found myself saying,

"Don't worry, Nur-jan. They didn't break."

Then there was a peculiar boldness that began to take shape in my life. Up until then I had been afraid to let anyone know of my interest in Christ. For one thing, I dreaded the thought of people making jokes about the

"sweeper Begum." Of more concern, I was afraid my family would ostracize me; Mahmud's father might even try to take him away. I was even fearful lest some fanatic take to heart the injunction: he who falls away from his faith must die. So I was really not anxious to be seen at the Mitchells. The group of women who came out of David and Synnøve's house that first night still gave me concern. My own servants certainly knew that something unusual was happening to me. When I put all this together I was living in a state of constant uneasiness, not knowing when the pressure against me would begin. But after my three encounters with God, I found myself making a surprising admission to myself one day. As far as I was concerned, my decision to become a Christian was now public information. As the Bible says, I was "confessing Jesus with my lips."

"Well," I said to myself as I stood at my bedroom window one day, "we'll just let the results fall where they may."

I didn't expect results quite so quickly. Soon after Christmas, 1966, a servant came to me with her eyebrows arched, "Mrs. Mitchell is here to see you, Begum Sahib," she said.

"Oh?" I said, trying to sound casual, "show her in." My heart pounded as I walked to the door to meet my guest. "I am so honored to have you visit," I said, making sure that the maid, hovering in the background, heard me.

Synnøve came to invite me to dinner. "There will be a few others there, people we are sure you would like to meet," she said. Others? I felt the old wall rise within me. Synnøve must have caught the hesitant

look in my eyes for she sought to reassure me. "Most of them are Christians," she said. "Some are English, some Americans. Would you come?" her eyes pleaded hopefully.

And of course—with more enthusiasm than I felt—I said that I would be delighted.

I wondered why many Christians were so often shy! I had been in contact with

Christians before, usually at state dinner parties I had hosted as wife of a govern-

ment official. The dinners were formal events, served by uniformed servants,

amidst Belgian lace and with centerpieces of fresh flowers; lengthy affairs, with

numerous courses, each served separately on its own china.

There were many

Christians of different nationalities among the guests, but not one of them ever

mentioned his faith, even when it would have been a natural part of the conver-

sation. The people I'd meet at the Mitchells, I felt, would not be so backward.

The next day I drove the now-familiar route to the Mitchells' house. David and

Synnøve greeted me warmly and introduced me to their friends. I wonder how I

would have felt if I'd known at the time how large a role some of these people were

going to play in my life.

The first couple were Ken and Marie Old. Ken was an Englishman whose blue

eyes twinkled humorously behind thick glasses. He was a civil engineer who wore

an air of informality as easily as he wore his rumpled clothes.

His wife, Marie, was

an American nurse with a practical air offset by a beautiful smile. The others were

warm and friendly people, too.

And then to my horror I found myself the center of attention.

Everyone was eager

to hear about my experiences. What I expected to be a quiet dinner turned out to be a question and answer period. The dining room was still—even the several children sat quietly—as I told about my dreams, and about my separate meetings with the three personalities of God. At the end of dinner David complimented his wife on the meal but said he felt that the spiritual nourishment of my story was even richer.

"I agree," said Ken Old. "I've seen you before, you know. I used to live in Wah. I would pass your garden in the early morning and admire your flowers. Sometimes you were in the garden but I must say you don't look like the same woman." I felt sure I knew what he meant. The Bilquis Sheikh of a few months ago had been an unsmiling person. "You are like a child," Ken went on to say, "who has suddenly been given a gift. In your face I see an incredible wonder at that gift. You treasure it more than anything you have ever possessed."

I was going to like this man.

I had enjoyable conversations with the others, and I realized that I had been right. These Christians were very different from Christians I had met at other dinner parties. Before the evening was over, each person had told a little about what the Lord was doing in his life. David was right. The meal was excellent, but the true feeding came from the Presence in that little house. I had never known anything similar, and I found myself wishing I could get this same feeding regularly.

Which is why, as I was about to leave, the comment from Ken struck me with such impact. Ken and Marie came up and took my hand. "You'll need some regular

Christian fellowship now, Bilquis," said Ken. "Will you come to our house on Sunday evenings?"

"Could you?" asked Marie hopefully.

And that is how I began regular meetings with other Christians.

Sunday evenings

we met at the Olds' house, a brick dwelling whose living room could barely hold

the dozen people who crowded in. Only two were Pakistanis, the rest were Amer-

icans and Englishmen. I met new people, too, such as Dr. and Mrs. Christy. This

wiry, energetic-looking American doctor was an eye specialist and his wife a nurse.

Both were on the local mission hospital staff. At the meetings we sang, read the

Bible and prayed for each others' needs. It quickly became the high point of my

week.

Then one Sunday I didn't particularly feel like going. So I rang up the Olds and

gave some excuse. It seemed a little thing, but almost

instantly I began to feel un-

easy. What was it? I walked through the house restlessly, checking on the servants'

work. Everything was in order, yet everything seemed out of order.

Then I went to my own room and knelt down to pray. After a while Mahmud

crept in, so quietly that I didn't know he was there until I felt his little soft hand in

mind. "Mum, are you all right?" he asked. "You look funny." I smiled and assured

him that, yes, I was all right. "Well you keep walking around looking. As if you'd

lost something."

Then he was gone, skipping out the door and down the hall. I looked as if I had

lost something?! Mahmud was right. And I knew right then what it was I had lost.

I'd lost the sense of God's glory. It was gone! Why? Did it have

something to do
with my not going to that meeting at the Olds? With my not
having fellowship
when I needed it?
With a sense of urgency I phoned Ken and said that I'd be
there after all.
What a difference. Immediately I felt, actually felt, the return
of warmth to my
soul. I did go to the meeting, as I promised. Nothing unusual
took place there, yet
again I knew I was walking in His glory. Ken had apparently
been right. I needed
fellowship. I had learned my lesson. I determined from then on
to attend regularly
unless Jesus Himself told me not to go.
As I drew a little closer to God, here a step, there a step, I
found myself hun-
gering even more for His word through the Bible. Everyday, as
soon as I arose, I
would begin reading it with a never-failing sense of newness.
The Bible became
alive to me, illuminating my day, shedding its light on every
step I would take. It
was, in fact, my lovely perfume. But here too I found a strange
thing. One day Mah-
mud and I were to go to see his mother for the day. I was late
getting to bed the
night before and really didn't feel like getting up at dawn to
have an hour with the
Bible, so I told Raisham to wake me with my tea just before we
were supposed to
set off.
I didn't sleep at all well that night. I tossed and twisted and
had bad dreams.
When Raisham came in, I was exhausted. And I noticed that
the entire day didn't
go right.
Strange! What was the Lord saying to me? That He expected
me to read the Bible
every day?
That was the second time when I seemed to be stepping out of

the glory of the
Lord's Presence.

But the experience, nonetheless, left me with a strange sense of excitement. For I had the feeling that I was sitting on an important truth without realizing it. There were times when I was in the Presence and experienced that deep sense of joy and peace, and there were times when I lost the sense of His Presence.

What was the key? What could I do to stay close to Him? I thought back over the times when He had seemed unusually close, way back to my two dreams and to the afternoon when I sensed the exquisite fragrance in my winter garden. I thought about the first time when I had gone to the Mitchells and about the later times when I had read my Bible regularly, and gone to the Sunday meetings at the Olds. Almost always these were times when I knew the Lord was with me.

And I thought about opposite times too, moments when I knew that I had lost this sense of His nearness. How did the Bible put it? "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30, KJV). Is that what happened when I scolded the servants? Or when I failed to nourish my spirit with regular Bible reading? Or when I just didn't go to the Olds?

Part of the key to staying in His company was obedience. When I obeyed, then I was allowed to remain in His Presence.

I got out my Bible and searched in John until I found the verse where Jesus says:

When a man loves me, he follows my teaching. Then my Father will love him,
and we will come to that man and make our home within him.
John 14:23

That was the Bible's way of expressing what I was trying to

say. To stay in the
glory. That was what I was trying to do!
And the key was obedience. "Oh, Father," I prayed, "I want to
be Your servant,
just as it says in the Bible. I will obey You. I've always thought
it a sacrifice to give
up my own will. But it's no sacrifice because it keeps me close
to You. How could
Your Presence be a sacrifice!"
I had never gotten used to those times when the Lord seemed
to speak so di-
rectly to my mind, as I am convinced He did right then. Who
else but the Lord
would have asked me to forgive my husband! Love your former
husband, Bilquis.
Forgive him.
For a moment I sat in shock. Feeling His love for people in
general was one
thing, but to love this man who had hurt me so much?
"Father, I just can't do it. I don't want to bless Khalid or forgive
him." I recalled
how once I had childishly even asked the Lord not ever to
convert my husband be-
cause then he would have the same joy that I had. And now
God was asking me to
love this same man? I could feel anger rising within me as I
thought of Khalid, and
quickly put him out of my mind. "Maybe I could just forget him,
Lord. Wouldn't
that be enough?"
Was it my imagination or did the glow of the Lord's Presence
seem to cool? "I
can't forgive my husband, Lord. I have no capacity to do so."
"My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).
"Lord, I can't forgive him!" I cried. Then I listed all the terrible
things he had
done to me. As I did, other wounds surfaced, hurts that I had
pushed into the back
of my mind as too humiliating to think about. Hate welled
within me and now I felt
totally separated from God. Frightened, I cried out like a lost

child.

And quickly, miraculously, He was there, with me in my room.

Flinging myself at

His feet, I confessed my hate and my inability to forgive.

"My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Slowly, deliberately, I swung my terrible burden over to Him. I

let go of my re-

sentment, my hurt and the festering outrage, placing it all in

His hands. Suddenly I

sensed a light rising within me, like the glow of dawn.

Breathing freely, I hurried to

my dresser and took out the silver-framed picture and looked

down at Khalid's

face. I prayed: "O Father, take away my resentment and fill me

with Your love for

Khalid in the name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

I stood there for a long time, looking at the picture. Slowly the

negative feeling

within me began to fade. In its place came an unexpected love,

a sense of caring

for the man in the photo. I couldn't believe it. I was actually

wishing my former

husband well.

"Oh, bless him, Lord, give him joy, let him be happy in his new life."

As I willed this, a dark cloud lifted from me. A weight was removed from my

soul. I felt peaceful, relaxed.

Once again I found myself living in His glory.

And once again I found myself wanting never to leave His

company. As a re-

minder to myself of this desire, late as it was, I went to the dressing room and

found some henna dye. With it I drew a large cross on both hands to remind me al-

ways.

Never, if I had anything to say about it, would I again

deliberately step away from

His company.

It would take me a long time, I was sure, to learn the skill of living in the glow of

His Presence, but it was a training time I welcomed with immense excitement.
And then one night I had a terrifying experience. I did not know I would be hearing from another side.

7

The Baptism of Fire and Water

I had been sound asleep that night in January 1967 when I was startled awake by my bed shaking violently.
An earthquake? My heart was gripped by a nameless terror. And then I sensed a horrible malevolent presence in my room; one that was definitely evil.
Suddenly I was thrown out of my bed; whether I was in my physical body or spirit I do not know. But I was pushed and thrown about like a straw in a hurricane.
The face of Mahmud flashed before me and my heart cried out for his protection.
This must be death coming for me, I thought, my soul quaking. The awful presence engulfed me like a black billowing cloud and instinctively I screamed out to the One who now meant everything to me. "O Lord Jesus!" At this I was shaken mightily, as a dog ravages his prey.
"Am I wrong to call on Jesus?" I cried to God in my spirit. At this a great strength surged through me and I called out: "I will call on Him! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"
At this the powerful ravaging subsided. I lay there worshiping and praising the Lord. However, sometime around three in the morning, my eyelids became too heavy and I slipped to sleep.
I was awakened in the morning by Raisham bringing me my morning tea. I lay there for a moment feeling such a sense of relief. As I closed

my eyes in prayer, I
saw the Lord Jesus Christ standing before me. He wore a white
robe and a purple
cape. He gently smiled at me and said, "Don't worry; it won't
happen again."

I felt then that my harrowing experience was satanic, a test
Jesus permitted for
my own good. I recalled the cry that came from deep within
my soul: "I will call on
His name, I will say Jesus Christ."

My Lord was still standing before me.

It is time for you to be baptized in water, Bilquis, He said.
Water baptism! I had heard the words distinctly, and I didn't
like what I heard.

As soon as I could I dressed and asked Nur-jan and Raisham to
see that I wasn't

disturbed until lunchtime. I stood at the window thinking. The
morning air was

cool, and pale steam drifted up from the garden springs. I
knew that the signif-

icance of baptism is not lost on the Muslim world. A person can
read the Bible

without arousing too much hostility. But the sacrament of
baptism is a different

matter. To the Muslim this is the one unmistakable sign that a
convert has re-

nounced his Islamic faith to become a Christian. To the Muslim,
baptism is apos-

tasy.

So here was a difficult testing point. The issue was clearly
drawn. Would I yield

to the fear of being treated as an outcast, or worse, as a
traitor, or would I obey

Jesus?

First of all I had to be certain that I was really obeying the
Lord, and not some

illusion. For I was far too new at being a Christian to trust
"voices." How could I

test my impression better than through the Bible? So I went
back to my Bible and

read how Jesus Himself had been baptized in the Jordan. And I

looked again at Paul's letter to the Romans where he talked about the rite in terms of death and resurrection. The "old man" dies, and a new creature arises, leaving all his sins behind.

Well, that was that. If Jesus was baptized, and if the Bible called for baptism, then of course I would obey.

That very moment I rang for Raisham.

"Please ask Manzur to get the car ready," I said. "I'm going to visit the Olds after lunch."

Shortly I was once again seated in Marie and Ken's small living room when I

burst forth in my usual way. "Ken," I said, facing him squarely, "I'm sure that the

Lord has told me to be baptized."

He looked at me for a long moment, his brow furrowing, perhaps trying to fath-

om the depth of my intention. Then Ken leaned forward and said, very, very seri-

ously: "Bilquis, are you prepared for what may happen?"

"Yes, but . . ." I started to answer.

Ken interrupted, his voice low. "Bilquis, a Pakistani I met the other day asked if I

were a sweeper in my own country." He looked at me levelly.

"Do you realize that

from now on you would not be the Begum Sheikh, the

respected landowner with

generations of prestige? From now on you will be associated with the sweeper

Christians here?"

"Yes," I answered. "I do know that."

His words became still firmer and I steeled myself to look directly at him.

"And do you know," he continued, "that Mahmud's father can easily take him

away from you? He could label you an unfit guardian."

My heart was stung. I had worried about this, but hearing Ken say it aloud made

the prospect sound all the more possible.

"Yes, I know, Ken," I said weakly. "I realize many people will think I am commit-

ting a crime. But I want to be baptized; I must obey God."

Our conversation was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the Mitchells. Ken

immediately told them we had something important to discuss.

"Bilquis," he said,

"wants to be baptized."

Silence. Synnøve coughed.

"But we don't have a tank for it," said David.

"How about the church in Peshawar?" asked Marie. "Don't they have a tank?"

My heart sank. Peshawar is the capital of the North West Frontier Province. In

every sense of the word it is frontier territory, a provincial town populated by

conservative Muslims noted for their quickness to take action.

Well, I thought,

there goes any secrecy I might want to keep. The whole town would know within an hour.

It was left that Ken would make arrangements for us to go to Peshawar. We

should hear from the pastor there in a day or two.

That evening my phone rang. It was my Grand Uncle Fateh. I love this elderly

gentleman dearly. He was always so interested in my religious instruction.

"Bilquis?" My uncle's authoritative voice sounded upset.

"Yes, Uncle?"

"Is it true that you are reading a Bible?"

"Yes." I wondered how he knew. What else had he heard?

Uncle Fateh cleared his throat. "Bilquis, don't ever talk about the Bible with any

of the Christians. You know how argumentative they are. Their arguments always

lead to confusion."

I started to interrupt him but he rode over my words. "Don't invite

anyone—anyone—to your house without consulting me! If you

do, you know that
your family will not stand by you."

Uncle Fateh was quiet for a moment as he paused to catch his
breath. I took
advantage of the opening.

"Uncle, listen to me." There was a strained silence on the other
end of the wire. I

plunged ahead. "Uncle, as you'll remember, no one has ever
entered my home

without an invitation." My uncle would remember, all right; I
was well known for

ruthlessly refusing to see callers who had not arranged their
visits beforehand.

"You know," I concluded, "that I will meet whomever I like.
Goodbye, Uncle."

I hung up the phone. Was this an omen of things to come as
far as the rest of

my family was concerned? If Uncle Fateh reacted so strongly
just hearing that I

read the Bible, what would happen when he and the rest of my
family learned about

my baptism? I didn't like to think.

Which only added fuel to my drive to be baptized right away. I
wasn't sure I

could resist pressure from scores of people I loved.

No word came from Ken.

The next morning as I was reading the Bible, I again ran across
the story of the

Ethiopian eunuch to whom Philip had brought the message of
God. The first thing

the eunuch did, as soon as he saw water, was to jump down
out of the carriage to

be baptized. It was as if the Lord was telling me all over again,

"Get your baptism

and get it now!" I felt sure He meant that if I waited much
longer, something or

someone might prevent it.

I leaped from my bed, realizing with fresh power that huge
forces were mar-

shaling to block me from what the Lord wanted me to do. I put
down the Bible,

summoned my maids who quickly helped me dress and shortly I was speeding to the Mitchells.

"David," I said, while we were still standing in the doorway, "is there any answer from Peshawar?"

"No, not as yet."

My voice rose. "Can't you baptize me here? Today? Now?"

David frowned. He ushered me in out of the cold morning air.

"Now, Bilquis, we

can't be in too much of a hurry about such a big step."

"I must obey my Lord. He keeps telling me to press on." I told him about my

morning Bible reading, and about the new insistence from the Lord that He wanted

me baptized before anything happened to me.

David held out his hands in helplessness. "I must take Synnøve up to Abbot-

tabad this afternoon and there isn't anything I can do now, Bilquis."

He put his hand on my arm. "Be patient, Bilquis. I'm sure we'll hear from Pe-

shawar tomorrow."

I drove over to the Olds.

"Please," I cried as Ken and Marie greeted me, "is there any way for me to be

baptized immediately?"

"We asked our pastor," Ken said, taking me by the arm and leading me into the

living room. "He says the whole matter has to go through the Session."

"Session?" I echoed. "What is that?"

He explained that his pastor wanted to baptize me but he had to get approval

from his church's governing board. "This could take up to several days," he added,

"and meanwhile anything could happen."

"Yes," I sighed, "word would get out." My mind raced desperately over all the

possible circumstances.

Then Ken told me an amazing thing. In the middle of the night

he had heard a
man's voice directing him to "turn to page 456 in your Bible."
What a strange way,
he thought, of giving a Bible reference. It was Job 13 and 14,
and the verses shone
out from the page. He read the verses that had so blessed him
and that seemed
meant for me. They started: "Wherefore do I take my flesh in
my teeth, and put my
life in mine hand? Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."
Am I ready for even this? I wondered. Is my trust that strong?
I stood up and took
Ken's arm. "Give me my water baptism now. And then, though
He kill me, I am
ready. I'll be better off in Heaven with my Lord."
I slumped down into a chair and looked up at Ken, apologizing.
"I'm sorry, Ken.
I'm getting upset. But one thing I know: the Lord said I should
be baptized now. I
shall put it to you bluntly. Are you going to help me or not?"
Ken sat back in his chair and ran his hand through his sandy
brown hair. "Of
course," he said, looking at Marie. "Why don't we go to the
Mitchells and see if
there isn't something we can do?"
We drove back to the Mitchells where for a while we all sat
quietly in prayer.
Then Ken sighed deeply, leaned forward and spoke to all of us.
"I'm sure we all
agree God has been guiding Bilquis in a most unusual way up
until now. And if she
insists her urgency to be baptized is from God, then let us not
be a hindrance to
her." He turned to David. "You're going to Abbottabad. Why
don't Marie and I take
Bilquis up there today, meet you and Synnøve, and arrange for
Bilquis' baptism
there this afternoon? We'll forget about Peshawar."
Suddenly, it seemed the right thing to do and we all started
making preparations.
I hurried home and had Raisham pack an extra set of clothes,

which the Olds said I would need. "Something water won't hurt," Ken said. Yet in the midst of all this I still felt uneasy. I even sensed the waning of my closeness to the Lord. Hadn't He in so many ways given me a specific urgent instruction? Hadn't He directed me to have my water baptism now?

A thought flicked through my mind. I dispelled the idea. It was unthinkable.

But when the thought persisted I asked my Lord in prayer: "Would it be all right, Father God?"

And thus on January 24, 1967 began a most unusual baptism. Raisham stood before me, in answer to my call.

"Yes, Raisham," I said again. "Please fill the tub."

She turned to her duty, a puzzled expression on her face; never had I taken a bath at this hour of the day.

Raisham announced that my tub was ready; I dismissed her.

What I proceeded

to do may have some theological problems. But I wasn't thinking in theological

terms. I was simply trying to be obedient to a strong urge, which was backed up by

Scripture. I was supposed to be baptized now, and with the impediments that I felt

marshaling themselves, I had doubts about waiting even until the afternoon.

So, because I wanted more than anything else in the world to stay in the Lord's

Presence, and the way to do that was through obedience, I walked into the bath-

room and stepped into the deep tub. As I sat down, water rose almost to my shoul-

der. I placed my hand on my own head and said loudly:

"Bilquis, I baptize you in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

I pressed my head

down into the water so that my whole body was totally immersed.

I arose from the water rejoicing, calling out, and praising God. "O Father, thank You. I'm so fortunate." I knew that my sins had been washed away and that I was acceptable in the sight of the Lord. I did not try to explain to Raisham what I had done and in her usual reserved manner she pointedly did not ask. Within a few minutes I was dressed, waiting for the Olds to take me to my baptism in Abbottabad. Again, I didn't know what the theology of the situation was. I did know my motives. These Christian friends had taken such care of me, helping me. They had gone through a lot for me and I didn't want to confuse matters further. I would go ahead with the baptism, although some untrained instinct told me I had already done what the Lord wanted of me. I tried to read the Bible but my Spirit rejoiced so that I was unable to concentrate. I was back in the Glory again, just as I always was when I obeyed Him explicitly, with the Bible as my only check. "Begum Sahib, Begum Sahib?" I looked up. It was Raisham. The Olds were outside, waiting. I told Mahmud I would be away for the rest of the day. I felt it better if he were not too involved in an event that might have unpleasant consequences. Then I went out to join Ken and Marie. It was a two-hour drive to Abbottabad, along a road that was lined with firs and pines. I didn't mention my tub baptism. Instead I told about the many times I had traveled this same road on family outings, followed by several autos piled high with luggage. Silently I wondered if I should feel disloyal to this old heritage. We arrived at the mission to find the Mitchells waiting with a Canadian medical

doctor and his wife, Bob and Madeline Blanchard, who were our hosts. Along with them stood a Pakistani man. "This gentleman," said Synnøve, "is Padri Bahadur, the minister who will baptize you."

I looked around at the others, including an Anglican doctor and another Pakistani minister.

"Perhaps this is prophetic, Bilquis," said Synnøve. "Perhaps through you many Christians will be drawn closer, for this may be the first time in Pakistan that Baptist and Presbyterians and Anglicans have all gotten together in a common baptism."

There was an air of excitement about the room. Doors were closed, shades were drawn and I imagined what it was like back in the first century when Christians had their baptisms in the catacombs under Rome.

As we prepared for the ceremony, I looked around and asked, "But where is the tank?"

It developed there was none. Ken said that I would have to be sprinkled.

"But Jesus was immersed in the Jordan," I said.

We had crossed a river just before arriving at the mission station. "Why not take me back to the river?" I asked, but then I remembered that it was bitterly cold and others would have to get into that water, too, and I didn't press the point. Especially since I was certain that I had already received the sacrament.

And so I was baptized again. While water was being poured over me, I thought how the Lord must be chuckling. After the ceremony, I looked up to see tears streaming down the faces of the others in the room.

"Well," I laughed, "all this crying certainly doesn't encourage me!"

"Oh, Bilquis," sniffed Synnøve, coming up to throw her arms around me. She couldn't go on.

"Congratulations," said each of the others. Synnøve sang a hymn, Ken read from

the Bible and then it was time to head for home again.

It was a quiet drive. There was no anxiety amongst us; it felt good just to be with

Christians. We all said goodbye again amid tears, and I went into my house.

The comfortable mood was shattered as soon as I stepped through the door.

Raisham rushed up to me, eyes wide, anxiety in her voice.

"Oh, Begum Sahib, your family has been here asking about you! They say they

know that you are mixing with Christians and . . ."

I put up my hand. "Now stop!" I commanded, silencing the chatter. "Tell me

who came."

As she recited the names of those who had come to my house that day, a new

apprehension filled me. These were the senior members of my family, uncles, el-

derly cousins, aunts, people who would come to my house in this manner only on

a vitally important concern.

My heart sank. That night I ate with Mahmud, trying not to show my own fears,

but just as soon as he went to bed I retired to my own room. I looked out the win-

dow, and under the winter moon I could make out the outlines of the garden I

loved. All around me I sensed the comfort of the house, my sanctuary, my retreat.

And now? Would I even be able to keep my home? It was a strange thought, for I

had always had the security of family, money and prestige. Yet I felt without doubt

that it was also a prophetic thought. The forces which I knew to be marshaling

against me had already begun to express themselves through

my family. Much of my "power," much of my "security," lay in the family. What would happen if suddenly they all began, at once, to oppose me? Surely this was the very reason the Lord insisted that I have my baptism quickly, immediately. He knew me. He knew where I was most vulnerable. I stood there looking out the window. Shadows from swaying trees played through the window. "O Lord," I prayed, "please don't let them descend on me all at once. Please let them come one at a time." No sooner had I breathed these words, when there was a knock at the door. One of the maids came in to hand me a package. "This was just delivered for you," she said. Impatiently I tore off the wrapping to find a Bible. Inscribed on the flyleaf was: To our dear sister on her birthday. It was signed Ken and Marie Old. I held it to my breast, thanking God for such good friends. Then I opened it and my eye was attracted to a page on which these words seemed to stand out: "I will scatter them abroad. . . ." At the moment the meaning of these words was a mystery to me.

8

Was There Protection?

I awakened the next morning full of apprehension. Today the family would come again, either en masse or one at a time. Either way I dreaded the awful confrontation. I dreaded the accusations, the angry warnings, the lures and threats which I knew were coming. Above all, I hated hurting them. Not quite believing that God would answer my request, I had

Raisham bring out my clothes, chose the most attractive, issued word to the servants that I would be happy to see all visitors today and then went to the drawing room. There I sat on one of the white chairs and read while Mahmud played with his toy cars, weaving them in and out of the paisley design of the large Persian carpet on the floor. The hands of the clock moved to ten o'clock, eleven, and eventually noon. Well, I thought, it looks as if they plan an afternoon visit. Lunch was served and then while Mahmud napped I continued waiting. At last at three o'clock I heard the sound of a car stopping outside. I was steeling myself for battle when the car drove away! What was happening? I asked the maid and she said it was just someone making a delivery. Evening darkened the tall windows of the drawing room and shadows gathered high on the ceiling. Then there was a phone call for me. I glanced at the clock; it was seven. Were they phoning instead of coming in person? I picked up the phone to hear a soft voice I recognized very well—Marie Old. She sounded quite worried. Word of my conversion was certainly out already, as yesterday's invasion of relatives showed. So why the concern? "Are you all right?" Marie said. "I've been anxious about you." I assured her that I was fine. As soon as I hung up the phone, I called for my shawl and asked that the car be made ready. At this time of the year, my family did not normally visit after eight o'clock so I felt it was safe to leave. Odd, how not one relative had called or visited, since they had all been anxious to see me the previous day. I wanted reassurance from one of my Christian family. The Olds? Why had Marie

called so mysteriously? I drove to the Olds' house and was surprised to find it completely dark.

And then, quite unexpectedly, quite abruptly, I was alarmed.

As I stood at the

gate leading into their yard I could feel fear settle over me, touching me with clam-

my, cold horror. Dark thoughts came at me from dark corners of the yard. Surely I

had been foolish to come out alone at night! What was that back in the shadows?

My heart raced.

I turned. I was about to run for the car.

And then I stopped. No! This was no way to be acting. If I were a part of the

Kingdom, I had a right to the King's protection. Standing there in the awesome

darkness, still very much afraid, I deliberately willed myself back into the King's

hands. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." I said over and over again.

Incredibly the fear lifted.

As soon as it had come, it was gone. I was free!

Almost smiling now, I turned toward the Olds' house. After a few paces, I saw a

crack of light coming between two drawn curtains in the living room. I knocked.

The door slowly opened. It was Marie. When she saw me she gave a sigh of re-

lief and quickly drew me into the house and hugged me.

"Ken! Ken!" she called.

He was there in a moment. "Oh, thank God!" he exclaimed.

"We were quite wor-

ried about you." Ken told me that the Pakistani Padri at my baptism had become

quite concerned for my safety and had told them that they had made a mistake in

leaving me alone.

"So, that's why you were so concerned on the phone, Marie!" I suppressed a

nervous laugh. "Well, I expect the whole country will soon know about my conver-

sion, but thank you anyhow. So far, nothing has happened. Even my family didn't show up and you can't know how grateful I am for that answer to prayer."

"Let's thank the Lord," Ken said, and the three of us knelt together in their living room as Ken thanked God for my protection and asked Him to continue to watch over me.

So, I returned home, the richer for having called on God's help in the face of fear

by taking advantage of the name of Jesus. My servants said there had not been a

phone call all that evening. Well, I thought as I prepared for bed, watch out for

tomorrow.

Again, I waited in the drawing room all day, praying, thinking, studying the pat-

tern of the Persian carpet. There was not a word from anyone.

What was going on? Was this some kind of a cat and mouse game?

And then I thought to check with the servants. In Pakistan if you want to know

anything, ask a household servant. Through an uncanny grapevine, they know

everything about everybody.

Finally, I pinned down Nur-jan: "Tell me, what happened to my family?"

"Oh, Begum Sahib," she answered, suppressing a nervous giggle, "the strangest

thing happened. It was as if everybody was busy at once. Your brother had to go to

the annual Winter Cricket Tournament." I smiled; to my brother, cricket was more

important than a sister who was on her way to hell. "Your Uncle Fateh had to go

out of the province on a court case, your Aunt Amina needed to go to Lahore; two

of your cousins were called out of town on business, and . . ."

I stopped her; she need not go on any further. The Lord had said He would scat-

ter them and scatter them He did. I could almost hear my Lord chuckle. It wasn't, I felt sure, that the concerned members of my family would leave me alone, but now they would come one by one. And so it was. The first emissary was my Aunt Amina, a regal woman, still beautiful in her seventies. For years we had a close relationship of love and trust. Now as she walked in, her magnolia complexion was paler than usual and her gray eyes were rimmed with sadness. We chatted a bit. Finally I could tell she was coming to the real reason for her visit. Clearing her throat, she sat back and, trying to sound casual, asked: "Er . . . Keechi . . . uh . . . I have heard . . . that . . . you have become a Christian. Is it true?" I only smiled at her. She shifted uneasily in her chair and continued. "I thought people were spreading false rumors about you." She hesitated, her soft eyes imploring me to say that it wasn't true. "It is no lie, Aunt Amina," I said. "I have made a complete commitment to Christ. I have been baptized. I am now a Christian." She slapped her hands over her cheeks. "Oh, what a great mistake!" she cried. She sat very still for a moment, unable to add anything. Then, slowly gathering her shawl around her, she stood and with frozen dignity walked out of my house. I was crushed, but I asked the Lord to protect her from the devastating hurt she was feeling. I knew I had to discover His own prayer for my family. Otherwise, I would leave a swath of damaged loved ones behind me. "Lord," I said, "the ideal thing of course would be to have every one come to know You. But I know that

even if they aren't converted, I know You still love them, and right now I ask that

You touch each of these dear ones of mine with Your special blessing, starting, if

You will, with my Aunt Amina. Thank You, Lord!"

Next day I had to say the same prayer. This time it was for

Aslam, a dear elderly

male cousin who came to see me. A lawyer, he lived about 45 miles from Wah. As

the son of my father's brother, he had inherited many of my father's charac-

teristics, the same warm smile, the gentle sense of humor. I was fond of Aslam.

From his attitude, I was sure that he had not heard the full particulars of my prob-

lem. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and then Aslam said:

"When is the family meeting? I'll pick you up and we'll go together."

I chuckled. "I don't know when the family meeting will be, Aslam, but I do know

that I'll not be invited because the meeting is about me."

He looked so confused I knew that I had to explain everything.

"But please go to

the meeting, Aslam," I said, when I had finished. "Maybe you can put in a good word for me."

I watched him sadly make his way out of the house; it was obvious, I thought,

that a climax was approaching. I had better get to Rawalpindi and Lahore as soon

as possible. I didn't want Tooni and my son Khalid to hear garbled stories about

me. There was nothing I could do in person about my daughter Khalida, for she

lived in Africa. But I could face Khalid and Tooni. The very next day I set off for La-

hore. Khalid had done well and his home reflected it. He was living in one of my

houses, a lovely town bungalow surrounded by wide verandas and an immacu-

lately groomed lawn.

We drove through his gate, parked by the entrance and walked up onto the broad veranda. Khalid, well alerted by family and by a long phone call from me, hurried out to greet me. "Mother! How glad I am to see you," he said, though I sensed he welcomed me with a little embarrassment. We talked all that afternoon about what I had done, but in the end I knew Khalid did not understand at all.

Next I had to see Tooni. I drove to Rawalpindi and went straight to the hospital. I asked that Tooni be paged, and as I waited in her room, I wondered how I should go about telling her. Doubtless she had been hearing stories already. She certainly was aware firsthand that I had been reading the Bible. She may even have overheard fragments of my conversation with the Catholic nun, Dr. Santiago, in this same hospital when Mahmud had been admitted. One thing she surely did not know: how life-changing that visit with Dr. Santiago had been, for it was this little nun who encouraged me to pray to God as my Father. "Mother!" I looked up to see Tooni hurrying toward me, her chestnut hair in stark contrast to her white starched uniform, her face beaming, her arms outstretched.

I rose, my heart pounding. How was I going to break the news to her! I tried to think of gentle ways, but the fear of pressure from Tooni was too much. Without daring to be circumspect, I blurted it out. "Tooni," I said, "be prepared for a shock, dear. Two days ago I was . . . I was baptized." Tooni froze, her sensitive eyes filling with tears. "I thought it would come to this," she said, in a voice I could hardly hear.

I quickly put my arms around her, as I couldn't bear to see her

cry, and tried to comfort her, but with no success. "I can't go back and pretend to work," she said.

Since she had gotten permission to visit with me, we tried to talk, and though I tried my best to explain the necessity of a baptism, she kept saying, "Oh, Mum, did you really have to go so far?" I decided there was not much point in continuing with the conversation and it would be best to give her time to absorb this. So I gathered my things.

"Come see me, darling," I said, "when you feel you can. We'll talk." Tooni made no objections at all, so within minutes I was on the Grand Trunk Road headed home. The minute I arrived home my servants clustered around me. Nur-jan was wringing her plump hands and even Raisham's face was paler than usual. The phone had been ringing all day, relatives had been at the gate since early morning asking for me. Even as the servants chattered, the phone rang again. It was my sister's husband, who worked with a British oil firm. I had always thought of Jamil as a man of the world, but now his voice didn't sound very self-assured.

"Keecha, I have heard the strangest thing and cannot believe it," he said bluntly.

"A colleague told me that he heard you had become a Christian. Of course, I laughed at him and assured him that could never happen." Word really was spreading rapidly. I said nothing.

"Keecha!" Jamil's voice was insistent. "Did you hear me?" "Yes."

"That story isn't true, is it?"

"Yes."

There was another silence. Then: "Well, that's nice," Jamil snapped. "You've just lost more than you can know. And for what? For just another

religious viewpoint.

That's what." He hung up.

In ten minutes Tooni was on the phone sobbing. "Mummy, Uncle Jim just called to say that now Mahmud's father will be able to get him back. He says no court will allow you to keep him!"

I tried to comfort her but she hung up sobbing.

Late that night as I was in bed reading and Mahmud was just dropping off to

sleep, I heard a commotion outside and in came Tooni and my late sister's two

daughters who were very close to Tooni and very close to my heart. Though disap-

proving of my actions, their love and concern for me had held firm in all this time

of turmoil. I was upset at their driving alone all the way from Pindi at this late hour,

but their tense and ashen faces indicated that something was wrong. I had the ser-

vants bring in dinner for them, but they just picked at their food and the conver-

sation was trite. All three women kept glancing at Mahmud who was bright-eyed

and full of excitement at this unexpected turn of events. It was only after he finally

fell asleep that one of the nieces leaned forward anxiously.

"Keecha, do you realize what this means for other people?" She broke into tears.

"Have you thought of anybody else?" Her question was echoed in the brown eyes

of my other niece who sat silently across from me.

I reached across the table and took the girl's slim hand. "My dear," I said sor-

rowfully. "There is nothing I can do but to be obedient."

Tooni now looked at me through tearful eyes and, as if she had not heard a word

I said, begged me. "Mother, pack up and leave. Leave while there's something . . .

or someone . . . to leave with."

Her voice rose. "Do you know what people are saying? You'll be

attacked. Your own brother may be compelled to take action against you!" And then she broke down sobbing. "My friends say you'll be murdered!" "I'm sorry, Tooni, but I'm not going to run away," I answered gently. "If I leave now I'll be running for the rest of my life." Determination rose within me as I spoke. "If He wishes, God can easily take care of me in my own house. And no one, no one," I said, "is going to push me out." I sat up in my chair, suddenly feeling very dramatic. "Let them come and attack!" And then, as I sat there feeling so fiercely sure of myself, something happened. The warm personal Presence of God was gone. I sat, almost in panic, oblivious to the voices rising around me. But just as suddenly I realized what had happened. The old me, full of pride and stubbornness, had taken over. I was deciding what would happen, that no one would push me out of my home. I sank back in my chair, barely aware that Tooni was speaking to me. ". . . all right, then, Mummy," Tooni cried. "So you've become a Christian. Must you become a Christian martyr also?" She knelt by my chair and laid her head on my shoulder. "Don't you realize that we love you?" "Of course, dear, of course," I murmured, stroking her hair. Silently I asked His forgiveness for being so headstrong. Wherever He wanted me to go was fine, even if it meant leaving my house. As I said this in my heart I once again felt the Presence of the Father. The whole exchange had taken but a few minutes, but even as the three women sitting in front of me continued talking, I was aware that life was going on at another level too. The Lord was right then, at that moment, working

with me, teaching me. He was in the very process of showing me how to stay in His Presence.

"... so we will, then? All right?" It was Tooni's voice and I had no idea what she was asking me to agree to. Fortunately she went on. "If Mahmud's father comes after him, you can let me take him. I haven't become a Christian," she added pointedly.

Eventually the three girls quieted down and I told them to spend the night to which they agreed. As I bid Tooni and my nieces good night, I thought how our roles had changed. Once I was so protective and worried over them; now we were equally worried for each other. That night I prayed: "Lord, it's so difficult to talk to a person who doesn't have faith in You. Please help my family. I'm so worried for the welfare of my loved ones."

As I drifted off to sleep, I again seemed to have left my body as if floating. I found myself standing on a grassy slope surrounded by pine trees. A spring bubbled near me. All about me were angels, so many that they seemed to form a hazy mist. I kept hearing one name, "Saint Michael!" The angels gave me courage. And then I was back in bed. I got up and, still sensing their spiritual strength, went to Mahmud's room. I pointed to him in his bed and then went to where the girls slept and did the same. I went back to my bedroom and got down on my knees. "Lord," I prayed, "You have shown me so many answers, now show me, I pray, what You are going to do with Mahmud. I would like to give Tooni some assurance."

I felt urged to open my Bible and this passage leaped up from the page: Genesis

22:12—"Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him. . . ."

"Oh, thank You, Father," I sighed.

At breakfast I was able to assure Tooni. "Darling, nothing is going to happen to your son; you never need worry." I showed her the Scripture given to me. Whether my faith was contagious or Tooni was touched by the Holy Spirit, I don't know. But her face did relax and she smiled for the first time in two days. My daughter and nieces left my house on a somewhat less somber note that

day. But the flow of the relatives and friends continued.

A few days later Raisham announced that there were seven people, all very dear concerned friends wanting to see me. I didn't want to face them without Mahmud.

The boy should know everything that was going on. So I found him and together

we went downstairs to the drawing room. There they sat in straight-backed formality far forward on their chairs. After the tea and cakes and small talk, one of those present cleared his throat. I steeled myself for what I knew was coming.

"Bilquis," said a friend I'd known since childhood, "we love you and we have been thinking over this thing you have done and we have a suggestion which we think will be of help to you."

"Yes?"

He leaned forward and smiled.

"Don't declare your Christianity publicly."

"You mean keep my faith a secret?"

"Well . . ."

"I can't," I said. "I can't play games with God. If I must die, I die."

All seven of them seemed to edge closer to me. An old friend of my father glared

at me. I was about to glare back but caught myself. They thought they had my wel-

fare at heart.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I just can't do what you ask." I explained that my faith had quickly, in little more than a month, become the most important thing in my life. "I cannot keep quiet about it," I said. I quoted them the Scripture where the Lord says: "Every man who publicly acknowledges me I shall acknowledge in the presence of my Father in Heaven, but the man who disowns me before men I shall disown before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32, 33).

"But," said another elderly gentleman, "you are in a very peculiar situation. I'm sure your God wouldn't mind if you kept quiet. He knows you believe in Him.

That's enough." He quoted the Quran law on apostasy. "We're afraid," he said,

"that someone will kill you."

I smiled but no one else was smiling. It was a pointless discussion, as they saw.

When they rose to go I was given my ultimatum.

"Remember, Bilquis, if you get into trouble, none of your friends or family can stand by you. The ones who care the most will have to turn their backs on you."

I nodded. I well understood their words. I wished now that I had sent Mahmud

out to play in the garden so that he would have heard none of this. When I looked

at him, though, sitting on his little chair beside me, he just smiled. "It's all right,"

he seemed to be saying.

They were near tears as the group prepared to leave. A close friend of my mother

kissed me. "Good-bye," she said.

She repeated the word with a strange emphasis. Then she broke into tears,

pulled herself away and hurried out the door.

The house seemed like a tomb after they left. Even Mahmud's usual noisy play

was subdued.

Three weeks passed when the only sound in my house was the hushed voices of servants and the concerned phone calls from Tooni and my nieces.

If it weren't for the Mitchells and the Olds and for our regular Sunday evening meetings, I wonder if the freeze-out might not have worked. Each day the family battle line was seen more clearly. I saw it in the anger on the face of a cousin or in the scornful glance of a nephew as they passed my house and happened to see me in the garden.

It was there in the cold voice of an aunt who called to say that she wouldn't keep a luncheon appointment. The boycott had begun. My phone remained silent, and no one pulled the bell cord at my gate. Not one member of the family came to call, even to scold. I could not help but recall a verse from the Quran (Sura 74-20): If you renounced the faith, you would surely do evil in the land and violate the ties of blood. Such are those on whom Allah has laid His curse leaving them bereft of sight and hearing.

In a very real way this was happening. I had violated the ties of blood and I undoubtedly would not see or hear from my family anymore. The normal chatter and laughter of the servants had quieted as they slipped in and out of my rooms. I could hardly get them to talk to me beyond the usual, "Yes, Begum Sahib."

And then one morning the boycott took a strange turn. There was a soft click of my door and I turned to see Nur-jan quietly enter to minister my toilette. It was so unlike her usual exuberance. Raisham stepped in even more solemn than usual. As they proceeded to their task, they did not speak and I was

bothered by the haunted
look on both of their faces.
I waited for some word but Nur-jan continued her tasks
silently, without the
usual gossip or chatter. Raisham's face was graven. Finally,
with a little of the old
fire in my voice, I said, "All right, I can tell something is wrong.
Tell me about it."
The brushing halted as I heard the news. Except for Raisham,
standing before
me now, all of my Christian servants, including Manzur, had
fled my house in the
middle of the night.
9

The Boycott

What did it mean, this defection? Four servants quitting! In a
town like Wah where
any job was hard to come by, their decisions were hard to
understand.
It was fear of course. Manzur was afraid because I asked him
to get me a Bible
and had him drive me to the home of missionaries. The other
three Christian ser-
vants must have picked up his concern. They must have heard
the rumblings of a
volcano which would soon erupt and didn't want to be caught
in the overflow.
But what about Raisham, this Christian servant who now began
to brush my hair
again? I could feel her graceful hands tremble as she started
her work.
"And you?" I asked.
She bit her lip as she continued her brushing. "I probably
shouldn't stay," she
said softly. "It's going to be . . ."
"Very lonely," I concluded her statement.
"Yes," she said, swallowing, "and . . ."
"And you're afraid. Well, if you left, Raisham, I wouldn't blame
you. You have to

make up your own mind, just as I did. If you do stay though, remember that Jesus told us we would be persecuted for His sake.”

Raisham nodded, her dark eyes moist. She took a hairpin out of her mouth and proceeded to do up my hair. “I know,” she said sadly.

Raisham was quiet the rest of the day. Her concern affected Nur-jan who was approaching quiet hysteria. The next morning when I awakened I could hardly bring myself to ring the little bell. Who would be with me now? My bedroom door opened slowly and Nur-jan came in. Then, in the near darkness of winter’s early hours another form followed. It was Raisham!

Later, I told her how much I appreciated her staying. She blushed. “Begum Sahib Ji,” she answered softly, adding the affectionate third salutation which means, May you have long life. “As you serve the Lord, so I will serve you.”

With the rest of my Christian servants gone, my house became even quieter, partly because I did not replace them all. My needs were simpler now that no family came by. I decided not to rehire Christians for a while. I found a new chauffeur, a Muslim named Fazal and a new Muslim cook’s assistant, but I hired no one else.

I was especially relieved for Mahmud who continued to play happily in the house or garden. But I still worried. How much of his heritage was I putting in jeopardy? How much of the boy’s rightful family ties was I threatening? Just yesterday he had asked again when his cousin Karim was going to take him fishing. Karim had promised to teach Mahmud the mysteries of catching the fish that slipped among the mossy rocks of our garden and village stream, which joined the Dhamra River.

“Mum!” Mahmud had asked. “When is Karim going to come?”

I looked down at the boy whose eyes were shining, and I just didn't have the heart to tell him that his fishing party would never take place. Mahmud could not have been very drawn to Christianity so far. I read him Bible stories, which he loved so much that I moved his bedtime from 8:00 to 8:30 so we could have plenty of time for them. But what were a few stories compared with a fishing trip? And friends? For bit by bit Mahmud's friends began to stop coming over. Mahmud couldn't understand this, and when I tried to explain it to him he looked at me in puzzlement.

"Mum," he said, "who do you love better, me or Jesus?" What should I say! Especially right now when he was lonely. "God has to come first, Mahmud." I said, paraphrasing the Lord's warning that unless we put family after Him, we are not truly His own. "We have to put God first," I said, "even before the people we love most in the world."

Mahmud seemed to accept this. He seemed to be listening when I read him the Bible. Once, after I had read to him, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest," I heard his nap-time pleas: "Jesus, I love You and I will come unto You, but . . . please don't give me rest. I don't like resting." He would even fold his hands and pray, but I knew that it was hard on him being alone and seeing me alone.

Then at 3:00 one morning my white bedside phone did clamor. I reached toward the instrument, my heart pounding. No one would call at this hour unless there had been a death in the family. I picked up the phone and at first heard only heavy breathing. Then three words were thrown at me like stones:

"Infidel. Infidel. Infidel."

The phone went dead. I lay back on my bed. Who was it? One of the fanatics my uncles constantly warned me about? What might they do? "Oh, Lord, You know that I don't mind dying. But I'm an awful coward. I cannot stand pain. You know how I feel faint at the very thought of an injection. Oh, I pray that I will be able to bear pain if it comes." Tears filled my 92 eyes. "I guess I'm not made of the stuff of martyrs, Lord. I'm sorry. Just let me walk with You through whatever comes next."

What did come next was a threatening, anonymous letter.

"Let's be clear. There is only one word to describe you. Traitor." Then there was another letter and shortly still another. They all contained warnings. I was a turncoat and I would be treated as such.

Late one afternoon some months after my conversion, I stood in my garden with the crumpled remains of one such letter in my fist. It was particularly vitriolic, calling me worse than an infidel, a seducer of the faithful. True believers, the letter said, had to burn me out like gangrene was burned out of a healthy limb.

Burn me out? Was this more than just a figure of speech? I walked further into the garden, around which glowed beds of petunias, sweet william and alyssum.

Spring had blossomed into summer. Quinces flourished in the garden, and the last of the white petals were falling from the pear trees. I turned and looked back at my house. "They wouldn't touch my house!" I exclaimed inwardly. They wouldn't burn out a Begum! But, as if to confirm that I could no longer count on the protection of position and wealth, a caller came to pay me a visit. He was

announced by a servant.

"General Amar is waiting to see you, Begum," she said.

My heart jumped. I looked through the garden hedge and sure enough, there

stood a familiar olive drab command car. General Amar was a dear old friend from

my Army days. During World War II, I had been associated with him and now he

was a top general in the Pakistani Army. We had kept in touch with each other

through the years, particularly when my husband was Minister of the Interior and

worked closely with him. Was he, too, coming to condemn me?

Soon I could hear his footsteps crunching on the pathway of the garden as he

strode to meet me, all spit and polish in his natty khaki

uniform. He took my hand,

leaned over and kissed it. My apprehension lessened; evidently he was not on a

mission of battle.

He looked at me, his dark eyes glinting humorously. As always the general came

right to the point. "Is it true what people are saying?"

"Yes," I said.

"What made you do this?" he exclaimed. "You've put yourself in a very dan-

gerous situation! I've heard rumors that some people want to kill you!"

I looked at him silently.

"All right," he added as he sat down on the garden bench, his leather belt creak-

ing. "You know I'm like a brother to you?"

"I hope so."

"And, as a brother, I feel fondly protective toward you?"

"I hope so."

"Then, remember that my home is always open to you."

I smiled. This was the first kind thing anyone had said to me.

"But," the general went on to say, "there is something you should know. That

offer is a personal one." He reached over to a blossom, pulled

it to him and sniffed
it, then turned back to me, adding, "Officially, there wouldn't
be much I could do,
Bilquis."

"I know." I took the general's hand, we got up together,
strolled onto the terrace
and inside the house. As we walked I told him things had not
been easy.

"And they won't get easier, my dear," my friend said in his
matter-of-fact way.

Later, after I had ordered tea in the drawing room, he asked
with a quizzical smile:

"Tell me, Bilquis, why did you do it?"

I explained what had happened and found that General Amar
was listening care-
fully. How extraordinary! Here I was, without realizing it, doing
what the mission-

aries called witnessing. I was speaking about Christ to a
Muslim, and a high official

at that. And he was listening! I doubt that I really reached
General Amar that after-

noon but he was in a reflective mood half an hour later when
he bid me good-bye

in the summer twilight, again pressing his lips to my hand.

"Remember, Bilquis," he said huskily, "anytime you need my
help . . . anything I
can do as a friend . . ."

"Thank you, Amar," I said.

He turned and left, and our solitary, strangely sad visit was
over. I wonder if I'll

ever see him again, I thought.

For the first time during this boycott, during the anonymous
letters and phone

calls, during the warnings of old friends, I was learning what it
was to live from

hour to hour. It was the opposite of worrying. It was waiting to
see what He was

going to allow. For I was convinced that nothing occurred
without His permission.

I knew, for instance, that pressure against me must become
more intense. If that

did happen, then He would have allowed it and I must learn to reach for His Presence in the midst of seeming disaster. I would just live hour to hour, staying near Him. Yes, that was my key. Learn to keep His company, so that whatever happened, whenever it happened, I would still be in His glory. I thought I knew how King David felt when, fleeing from his son, Absalom, he picked up his lyre and sang: "But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory . . ."

(Psalm 3:3). The glory that, I understand, he considered the unspeakable blessedness, joy and felicity of the saints in heaven. For the moment the pressure from my family was, still, the boycott. Not one member of the family came to call, even to scold. With rare exceptions none of my old friends called either. The calculated exclusion from great moments in the family: births, deaths, weddings continued. Whenever I allowed myself to dwell on the loneliness this caused, I'd feel the glory begin to fade, and immediately I'd turn my thoughts by a sheer act of will to the times Jesus too had felt lonely.

It helped. But I found, a little to my surprise, that I desperately needed simple companionship. I who had been so aloof was now in need of closeness. Not even the Olds and the Mitchells came to the house anymore. For their own protection I advised them not to visit me.

One gray afternoon I retreated to my bedroom to read the Bible. It was unusually cold and a sharp wind rattled my windows. As I started to read, I felt a warmth on my hand and looked down to see a patch of sunlight resting on my arm. I glanced out of the window just in time to see the sun disappear again behind the clouds.

For just one minute, it seemed He had reached down and touched my hand for comfort.

I looked up, "Oh my Lord," I said. "I am so lonely; even my cheeks feel dried up from lack of talking. Please send someone to talk to today." Feeling somewhat foolish for asking for such a childlike thing, I returned to my

Bible. After all, I had His company and that should be enough. But in a little while I

was startled to hear an odd sound in the house, odd since it had been absent so long. There were voices outside.

I grabbed my shawl and flew out to meet Nur-jan running toward my room out of breath. "Oh, Begum Sahib," she squealed, "the Olds are here."

"Praise God," I exclaimed and hurried to meet them. Of course I saw Ken and

Marie at our Sunday services in their house, but this was different, a midweek call.

Marie rushed to me, taking my hand. "We just had to see you, Bilquis," she said, her blue eyes sparkling. "For no reason at all except we love being with you."

What a visit that was. I realized as we talked that I had been making a mistake not asking people over to visit me. Pride had kept me from admitting the need.

Suddenly I had an inspiration. Why not invite people to my house on Sunday for the meetings? But wouldn't this be heaping gunpowder on the flames? I tried to

quench the thought but it would not go away. Just as my friends were about to leave I said, quickly:

"Would you like to come here this Sunday night?"

The Olds looked at me, a bit shocked.

"I mean it," I said, extending my hands sideways. "This old house needs some life."

And so it was decided.

That evening as I prepared to retire, I thought how wonderfully the Lord provides

for us. When my family and friends were taken from me, He replaced them with

His own family and friends. I slept peacefully and awakened to the feel of a warm

sun streaming through my window. I got up and opened the window, reveling in

the soft breeze that drifted in. In its earthy garden aroma I could smell the warm

breath of the summer about to come upon us.

I couldn't wait for Sunday evening to come. By Saturday afternoon that old

house was filled with flowers; every floor, every window was scrubbed until it

shone. I hinted to Raisham that she might like to join us but she became a bit flus-

tered; she was not ready for such a bold step yet and I didn't press.

Sunday crept by while I kept Mahmud out of the drawing room, straightened the

furniture, constantly rearranged the flowers, and found a speck of dust here and

there to wipe away. But at last I heard the slamming of car doors and the voices of

arriving guests.

The evening was everything I had hoped for, with song and prayer and telling

each other what the Lord was doing. Just twelve of us, plus Mahmud, sitting

around comfortably in the drawing room, but I'd have sworn there were a thousand

other guests too, unseen, welcome.

The evening had another peculiar purpose too, one I had not foreseen. It turned

out that my Christian friends were still quite worried for me.

"Are you being extra careful?" It was Marie talking.

"Well," I laughed, "there is not much I can do. If someone wants to harm me,

I'm sure he'll find a way."

Ken looked around the drawing room and out the large glass doors into the garden. "You really don't have much protection here," he said. "I hadn't quite realized how vulnerable you are."

"How about your bedroom?" asked Synnøve. Everyone felt it wise to look over my room, so we all trooped in. Ken was particularly concerned by the windows looking out on the garden; they were protected only by a glass pane and wire screen.

He shook his head. "It really isn't safe, you know. You should do something about it, Bilquis; have some kind of heavy metal grill installed. Anyone could get through this."

I said I would see to it the next day.

Was it my imagination or did His glory fade just a little as I made the promise?

Eventually we said good-bye and I retired happier than I had been in a long time.

The next day, however, as I was about to send for an ironworker, I was once again aware of the quickly receding glory of the Lord. Why? Was it because I was about to take an action that was based on fear? It certainly did seem that every time I started to call the ironworker my action was stopped.

And then I realized why. When word got around the village that I was having my window barred, everyone would realize that I was fearful. I could just hear the gossip. "Ha! What kind of religion is Christianity, anyway? When you become a Christian you become fearful?" No, I decided, I would not have the window barred.

That night I went to bed confident that I had made the right decision. I fell asleep at once but suddenly I was awakened by a sound. I sat up, startled, but without

fear. Before me appeared a breathtaking sight. Through the closed and draped windows of my room, in a supernatural way, I could see my whole garden. It was flooded with a heavenly white light. I could see every rose petal, every tree leaf, every blade of grass, every thorn. And over the garden hung a calm serenity. In my heart I heard my Father saying, "You did the right thing, Bilquis. I am with you." Slowly the light faded and the room was dark again. I switched on my bedside lamp, lifted my arms and praised God. "Oh Father, how can I thank You enough? You have so much concern for each of us." The next morning I called all of my servants together and told them that they could sleep in the servants' quarters from now on if they chose to do so. Only Mahmud and I would sleep in the house. The servants exchanged glances, some in surprise, some in joy, one or two in alarm. But I knew one thing at least had been accomplished. The decision put an end to any thought of protecting myself. And with the decision the glory came back and stayed for a longer time than usual. Perhaps this was necessary for the next turn of events.

One morning when Raisham was brushing my hair she remarked casually: "I hear that your aunt's son, Karim, has died." I shot out of my chair and looked at her incredulously. "No," I gasped. Not Karim, who was supposed to take Mahmud fishing! He was one of my favorites! What had happened? Why did I have to find out about even Karim's death through the servants! With steely willpower I got control of myself and forced my body back down into the chair so that Raisham could go on with her work.

But my mind raced
on. This could be just a rumor, I thought. Raisham could have
mistaken the name.
My heart rose a little. Later, I asked an elderly member of the
staff to find out for
me what had really happened. She went into the village and in
an hour returned,
downcast.
"I am sorry, Begum Sahib," she said. "But it is true. He died
last night from a
heart attack and the funeral is today."
Then, this servant who had a facility for learning everything,
gave me news that
hurt even more. My aunt, the servant told me, knowing how
much I loved her son,
had specifically asked my family to "be sure and tell Bilquis
that my boy has died."
No one followed her wishes.
Later I sat at my window pondering it all. I had been excluded
from family
events, but never had the boycott hurt as it did now.
As I sat weeping softly I began to pray for His help and, as
always, the help
came. This time it was as if a warm cloak were placed gently
on my shoulders. And
with that sensation came an unusual plan of action. The very
idea shocked me. It
was so bold I knew it must be of the Lord.
10

Learning to Live in the Glory

As I sat at the window overlooking my garden, a strong wind
bent the tops of the
trees. In it I seemed to be catching an extraordinary message
that I could not be-
lieve I was correctly hearing.
"You can't really be telling me that, Lord," I said smiling. "I'm
just hearing voic-
es! You don't want me to go to Karim's funeral. It would be
unseemly. It would be

in poor taste. I would end up offending people who are in mourning."

Even as I objected, I recognized once again the sense of His Presence beginning to fade. Immediately, with this sign, I began to wonder if perhaps I really were being told to do this extraordinary thing, to go straight into the face of the hostilities of the boycott.

Finally, breathing a deep sigh, I got up from my place at the window, shrugged and said aloud, "I'm beginning to learn, Lord. My sense of the right thing to do is nothing compared with Yours! I'll go, since You are telling me to go."

And, of course, the sense of His Presence returned. What an extraordinary series of experiences I was having with this coming and going of His glory. Still, I had the feeling that I was just on the verge of understanding what this was all about. How would I be able to learn to stay in His Presence for an ever increasing percentage of time? I did not realize that over the next two months I was to have a series of experiences that would take me a step further in this learning process.

I stood in the cobblestone lane in front of Karim's house, hesitating. In spite of my promise to obey and the knowledge of His presence, I could feel my heart pounding and mouth turning dry. Taking a deep breath I headed toward the stone house, which stood among others like it. I walked into the courtyard and stepped onto the veranda, subject to the stares of the village people who were sitting around quietly. I went inside the old-fashioned house with its carved ceilings and white, plastered walls where Karim and I had so often laughed

and played together.

There was no laughter now. On top of the gloom of the family in mourning was added the chill of a score of contemptuous glances directed my way. I looked toward a cousin with whom I had been very close. Our eyes met for a minute; my cousin quickly turned her head and began talking with a neighbor.

Now squaring my shoulders I stepped into the living room of Karim's house, then sat down on one of the thick cotton mattresses which had been placed on the floor surrounded by bolsters and cushions to lean on. I smoothed my shalwars around my legs. Suddenly people seemed to wake up, realizing who I was. The quiet soothing conversation that had filled the room suddenly halted. Even the women saying their beads, each bead signifying a prayer to Allah, ceased and looked up. The room, which had been hot with the early summer heat and with the scores of bodies packed shoulder to shoulder, suddenly seemed chilled.

I said nothing, made no attempt to be sociable, simply lowered my own eyes and said my own prayers. "Lord Jesus," I whispered in my heart, "do be with me as I represent You to this group of dear friends and relatives who are so saddened by Karim's death."

After fifteen minutes the quiet flow of conversation began again. It was time to pay my respects to Karim's wife. Holding my head high, I arose from the mattress and stepped into the adjoining room where Karim's body lay. I gave my condolences to Karim's wife, then looked at the quiet face of my dear cousin shrouded in the new white cotton burial cloth and whispered to myself a

prayer to Jesus for this man's spirit. Oh, how I wished I had been able to talk to him before he died.

A low humming filled the room as close family members recited prayers or read

verses from the Quran. It was all part of the life and death rhythm, which I knew so

well. I was turning my back on it all. Before sunset today, there would be a proces-

sion to the graveyard with the men from the family following the bier. At the grave-

side the pallbearers would place the bier on the ground and the priest would call

out, God is most great. Lord, this is Thy servant, the son of Thy servant. He used

to testify that there is no God but Thee, and that Muhammad is Thy servant and

Thy messenger. . . .

As I stood listening to the soft moaning in the room, I saw Karim's mother

kneeling at the bier. She looked so forlorn, I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to

go to her side. Did I dare? Would it be an affront? Should I say anything to her

about Jesus? Probably not. Just my being there as a Christian was bringing Jesus to

her side in a caring way.

So I stepped over to Karim's mother and put my arms around her, telling her in

a soft voice how sorry I was. "Karim and I were so close. May God bless you and

comfort you." Karim's mother turned her face to me. Her dark tear-filled eyes

thanked me and I knew that Jesus was even then comforting her sorrow-filled

heart.

But Karim's mother was the only one in the room who seemed to accept what I

was doing. As I left her and returned to sit down among the mourners, one

cousin— a close one too—made quite a show of rising to her

feet and moving to
another room. Another cousin followed. And then another.
I sat there struggling with the emotions of my own sorrow for
Karim and his
family on the one hand and with this deep embarrassment on
the other. My heart
pounded. The hostility was reaching through my protection. It
was all I could do to
keep seated for the appropriate amount of time until I could
stand, make my good-
byes and walk out of the room. Finally, when I did leave, I felt
every eye in the
household staring at me.
In my car I sat for a moment at the wheel, trying to collect
myself. I had obeyed,
but the cost was high. Certainly I would prefer to have
remained at home rather
than walk right straight into the maw of this open anger.
If I thought I would have to walk through this valley only once
I was wrong. A
few weeks later, just as the early heat was beginning to settle
over our district, an-
other cousin died. Again, I heard of his death through my
household. Again, obey-
ing the Lord's direction, I found myself reluctantly walking into
a room full of
mourners, to the chilly discord of hate. As an act of will I
focused my concern away
from myself and toward the one person there who was really
bereaved, my cousin's
widow. She had a child just going on five, the same age as
Mahmud. She looked
so forlorn standing by herself at the coffin that I wept for her
and for her husband.
And then just as I had done at Karim's funeral, I found myself
being propelled
toward this desperate woman. As I approached our eyes met,
and I saw hesitation
cross her tear-stained face. Then, with a look of sudden
determination, knowingly
going against the will of her family, she extended her hand to

me. As I held her brown and shaking hand in my own, I wept in silence. We exchanged only one or two words, but my heart was praying fervently that the Holy Spirit would reach into her bereavement and keep His promise, even to this Muslim dear one, "Blessed are they who mourn."

"Thank you, Bilquis, thank you," the widow said in a whisper as at last she released my hand. I embraced her and walked out of the room. Oddly, there were two more funerals in quick succession. This was quite unusual even for a family of our size. But in each case I was told very clearly, very distinctly, by the Lord to get out of my safe little house and go into the place where I was needed. I was not to do too much talking. I was to let my caring presence be its own witness.

And all the while the Lord was working with me. He had so much to teach me, and He was using these funerals as His classroom. It was during one of these visits to a family funeral that I discovered the next great secret of staying in His Presence.

At a Muslim funeral no one cooks or eats in the house until the body is buried. This usually amounts to a day's fasting and is really not an ordeal. However, that day, as I sat isolated in the crowded room, I suddenly found that I wanted my usual afternoon tea. It was something, I said to myself, that I simply could not do without.

Finally, unable to control my desire, I stood and mumbled an excuse. "I have to wash my hands," I said. I slipped out of the house and drove quickly home where I had my precious tea and returned to the mourners. Immediately I felt a strange aloneness, as if a friend had left

my side. Of course I knew what it was. The comforting Presence of His Spirit had left me.

"Lord," I said to myself, "what have I done?"

And then I knew. I had told a lie when I was excusing myself.

"But it was only a white lie, Lord," I said. I sensed no comforting from the Spirit.

Just a deadness.

"But Lord," I pressed, "I don't have to follow those Muslim mourning practices anymore. And besides, I just can't do without my tea. You know that."

No sense of His Spirit.

"But Father," I pressed on, "I couldn't tell them that I went out for tea and cake.

That would have hurt them."

No Spirit.

"All right, Father," I said. "I understand. It was wrong for me to lie. I realize that I was seeking the approval of men and that I must live only for Your approval. I am truly sorry, Lord. I hurt You. With Your help I will not do that again."

And with those words His comforting Presence flooded me again, like rain fall-

ing on a parched lake bed. I was relaxed. I knew that He was with me.

And that was how I learned to move back into His Presence quickly. Whenever I

did not feel His nearness, I knew that I had grieved Him. I would search backwards

until I spotted the time when I last knew His Presence. Then I would review every

act, every word or thought until I discovered where I had gone astray. At that point

I would confess my sin and ask His forgiveness.

I learned to do this with increasing boldness. Through these exercises in obedi-

ence I learned the beautiful secret of repentance. Repentance, I discovered, was not

tearful remorse so much as admitting where I had gone wrong

and avowing with
His help never to make that mistake in the future. As I realized
my own weakness, I
could call upon His strength.
It was during this time that I discovered there was no such
thing as an innocent
white lie. A lie is a lie and is always of Satan, the father of lies.
He uses "harmless"
white lies to get us started in this insidious habit. Lies pave the
way for greater
temptations to come. Satan whispers that a white lie is
"consideration" for other
people. We bend ourselves to the world instead of to Jesus who
is the Truth.
Though I learned this lesson at the funeral of a relative, it was
the beginning of a
new kind of life for me, one where I attempted to weed out all
lying. From that day
on I would try to catch myself every time I was about to
commit a white lie. Once a
missionary friend invited me to a gathering that I did not want
to attend. I was all
set to make the excuse that I had another engagement. A
warning signal sounded
within me and I stopped myself just in time. Instead, I found
that I could be truth-
ful and still not hurt anyone's feelings by simply saying, "I'm
very sorry, but I won't
be able to be there."
Or, there was the day when I sat down to write a letter to a
friend in London and
almost automatically began writing that I had been out of town
for some time and
had not been able to answer his last letter. I stopped, pen
poised in midair.
Out of town? I had been here all the time. I crumpled the
paper, dropped it into
the wastebasket and started again. "Dear Friend: Please
forgive me for not answer-
ing your wonderful letter sooner. . . ."
Little things, certainly. But I was learning that to be careful in

small things made
it much easier to handle the larger temptations as they came.
Besides, life was so
much easier when I didn't have to spend a lot of time
contriving.

Slowly, surely, it began to dawn on me that I was trying to live
with Christ as my
constant companion! Of course, it just wasn't possible to do
this. So often I
caught myself falling into my old ways! But I kept trying.
And in the process I discovered the practical side of the
promise, "But seek ye
first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these
things shall be
added unto you" (Matthew 6:33 KJV). For, as I made the
attempt to put God first,
some of my other heartfelt needs were given back to me.
One afternoon Raisham came to my room with a startled
expression on her face.

"There's a lady in the drawing room waiting to see you," she
said.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Well, Begum Sahib, if I'm not mistaken it's the mother of
Karim."

Surely she must be mistaken! Karim's mother would not be
coming here!

I walked into the drawing room wondering who then it could
be. Sure enough,
there stood the mother of my dead cousin. Hearing my steps
she looked up, came
over and threw her arms around me.

"Bilquis," Karim's mother said, tears forming in her eyes, "I
just had to come
personally to tell you something. At first, at the funeral, I didn't
see you among all
the people. But I need to tell you how much comfort you were.
It's . . . I don't know
. . . something new. Something warm and special."

And at last I saw why I had not been allowed to speak of Jesus
directly to Karim's

mother during the time of her crushing bereavement. For that would have been to take advantage of her. Now however the situation was quite different. Gently and softly there in my drawing room I spoke to her about how much Jesus meant to me and how He was slowly and inexorably changing so many of my old imperious ways, replacing them with His warm human personality. "It's true," Karim's mother said. "You did care. You really wanted to share my sorrow."

It was a short visit but a wonderful one. Encouraging in two directions: First, that another human being had actually noticed a change in me; and second, I hoped that this was the beginning of a break in the family boycott.

It didn't happen quickly though. Every time the phone rang, it was Tooni or one of my missionary friends. So one morning just before Mahmud's fifth birthday, when the phone rang, I expected to hear Marie. Instead I heard the friendly voice of the mother of the second cousin who had died.

"Bilquis?"

"Yes."

"Bilquis, I just wanted to say how much I appreciated the help you gave my son's wife. She told me you really spoke to her heart."

How interesting. For I had said little. It was Christ who had done the consoling.

We exchanged a few pleasant words and then hung up.

Once again I could not help but be amazed at how Jesus had done the work through me when I said little or nothing about Him directly. It was my being there, representing His Spirit in this time of need, that had been the helper.

Over the weeks a few other family members came for short visits. They'd drop

by to see Mahmud on his birthday, bringing him sweets and toys. Ostensibly the reason for their visit was to see the boy. Actually, I knew, it was just a good excuse. They really had come to soften some of the hurt of the boycott. The visits were always strained and short. But they were bright, welcome chinks in the terrible wall that had been raised around me. Almost a year had passed since I had made the decision to accept Christ's call. How the time was flying! Soon my birthday would be here again. One year since I had given myself to the Lord. And now I was looking forward to my first real celebration of Christmas. I had of course seen Christmas celebrations when I was in Europe; Christmas trees, decorations, manger scenes, Santa Claus, presents, all kinds of delicious food, laughter and lots of fun. But never had I known what Christmas was like viewed from the heart. Much as I enjoyed these festivities, there wasn't much real meaning in them. I began to wonder if I could celebrate Christmas in a way that expressed the change that had come into my life. And then an idea came to mind. Besides having a worship time with the Mitchells, why not celebrate the coming of Jesus with everyone—missionaries and people from the village, even the Christians. Immediately I heard the warning voice of my family cautioning me not to make a display of my faith; and I also heard the general's voice warning me that he could no longer give me official protection if I got in trouble. I knew the idea of such Christmas celebrations would be a threat to many. Yet, after much prayer it seemed to me that my Presence was strongest

when I began to make plans for the unusual gatherings.
So I went ahead with the Christmas Day celebrations which
caused such a stir in
Wah. The village people arrived early and congregated around
the creche (borrowed from the Mitchells) and the tree that Raisham and
Mahmud had had fun
decorating the night before in the drawing room. I had the joy
of telling them the
wonderful story of God becoming man, because He loved us. In
the afternoon, a
group of Christians came. I sat on the floor with them, trying to
enter into their
exuberant singing (which was new to me) accompanied by
tambourine, harmonium and drums. The Mitchells helped me feel at home with
them.

Then to my astonishment one of the servants announced that
an aunt and some
cousins from Rawalpindi had arrived on a drop-in visit!
My heart leaped. How would they react? I need not have
worried—they reacted
in typical upper-class fashion, I'm afraid. First their jaws
dropped, then they quietly
retired to another room where they sat alone in strained
silence.

I didn't want to ignore either group so I spent my time going
from room to
room. It was like running back and forth from a hot shower to
a cold shower.

Finally, perhaps because of my own persistence, a few
members of my family
began to relax. Some even went into the drawing room and
joined the festivities
around the tree. By the end of the celebrations they were
passing small talk with
the Mitchells, if not with the others.

The party heralded, I hoped, the start of a different kind of
year. Not an easier
one, just a different one. Because immediately in front of me
lay many confusing

crossroads that could lead me into trouble if I took a wrong turn. For along with the smattering of relatives and friends who were now returning, came a different kind of visitor. They were people who were determined to convert me back to the Muslim faith. I had a feeling that there were interested onlookers, anxious to see how I would react to these voices beckoning me back home. Should I keep a discreet silence, or should I really speak my mind? The answer came to me, again, in terms of my Presence. For whenever I tried to be devious I felt uncomfortable and alone. But whenever I answered the loaded questions forthrightly and in love, then I felt that the Lord Himself was right with me.

One afternoon, for instance, there was a soft knock on my door. I was surprised, for it was two o'clock in the afternoon. "Yes?"

The door opened. It was Raisham. "Begum Sahib, you have a visitor."

There was a hesitancy in her soft voice. I had told Raisham that I preferred not to be bothered between noon and three in the afternoon. It was not an order, however. Before I would have ordered Raisham sharply not to bother me for any reason between noon and three. Now I explained to her that I no longer considered time as something I owned; it belonged to the Lord. If something came up which she herself thought I should see to, then of course she was to come to my room no matter what the hour.

"Begum Sahib, the man is an Englishman." There was a glint of amusement in

her brown eyes. "He says he wants to talk about God."

"All right," I said, wondering. "I'll be right out."

Waiting for me in the drawing room was a pale, sandy-haired Englishman. I was interested in noting that he wore typical Pakistani clothes, a white shirt and baggy trousers. With his pale face and white clothes he almost blended into the white walls of my drawing room. After apologizing for dropping in without an appointment, he came to the point. He said that he had traveled all the way from Karachi to see me; since he had converted from Christianity to Islam, members of my family thought we had interests in common. "Ah," I said to myself, "now I understand.

Knowing how much I like the British, they think I will be impressed by an Englishman who has left his Christianity for Islam."

My visitor hemmed and hawed and launched into the purpose of his visit.

"Begum," the man said, "one thing really disturbs me about Muslims who convert to Christianity. It is the Bible. We all know that the Christian New Testament has been changed from what God gave."

He was expressing Islam's main charge against the Bible, that it had been so altered that today's version is untrustworthy. The original, Muslims claim, had agreed with the Quran.

"I hope you won't think I'm being facetious," I said. "I really do want to know something. I've heard often that the Bible was changed but I've never been able to learn who changed it. When were the changes made and what passages were corrupted?"

My visitor leaned back and looked up at the ceiling, his fingers drumming the arm of his chair. He did not answer. It was unfair of me, I guess. As far as I knew there were no answers to these questions.

"You see," I went on, drawing on research I had made, "in the British Museum there are ancient versions of the Bible which were published nearly three hundred years before Muhammad was born. On every issue between Christianity and Islam these old manuscripts are identical with today's Bible. The experts say that in every basic essential today's Bible had not been changed from the original. This is important for me personally. For to me the Bible has become an alive Word. It speaks to my soul and feeds me. It helps guide me. . . ."

My visitor got to his feet in the middle of my sentence. ". . . and so," I went on, "I find it quite important to know if there really are places where I'm fooling myself. Can you tell me?"

"You talk about the 'Word' almost as if it were living," my visitor said.

"I believe that Christ is living, if that's what you mean," I said.

"The Quran itself says that Christ was the Word of God. I would love to talk with you about it some-time."

"I must be going."

And that was that. I saw my visitor to the door and invited him back. He never did return but others came, some well-primed for battle and with such misconceptions! I'll never forget the man who accused Christians of worshiping three separate Gods.

"Your so-called Trinity consists of God, Mary and Jesus!" he said. "You Christians say that God took a wife who was Mary and from their union Jesus was born. Allah can't have a wife!" he laughed.

I prayed quickly. And a clear line of thought came to mind.

"Do you read the Quran?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Well then, do you remember how the Quran says that Christ

was given the Spirit of God?" I had often wondered how the Quran could have such marvelous truths as this. "You perhaps have heard of Sadhu Sundar Singh, the devout Sikh to whom Jesus appeared in a vision. This is how Jesus explained the Trinity to him: 'Just as in the sun there are both heat and light, but the light is not heat and the heat is not light, but both are one, though in their manifestation they have different forms, so I and the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father, bring light and heat to the world. . . Yet We are not three but One, just as the sun is but one.'" It was quiet in the room when I finished. My guest was deep in thought. Finally he arose, thanked me for giving him time and silently left the house. As I watched his forlorn figure walk away, it occurred to me to wonder whether my little visits with people like the Englishman and this zealot were really being used by the Lord. I had no way of knowing, for I never heard from either of them again. It didn't matter. I perhaps should not even wonder about results. The only thing that did matter to me was obedience. If the Lord asked me to talk to these people, then that is what I should do.

As the winter rolled into spring, the Lord seemed to give me other ways of speaking too. I went to Lahore and— after a good but strangely uncommunicative visit with my son Khalid—I purchased a hundred copies of the Bible to give away to anyone who was interested. I also bought a quantity of Christian tracts. I gave them away at every opportunity, even leaving them in public places. I'm not at all sure this did any good. Once, when I went back to check, I

found my little stack
had dwindled but then I looked in the wastebasket. There,
crumpled up, were the
copies of my tracts.
“It seems so pointless, Lord,” I said. “Am I doing what You
want? Why is it,
Lord,” I said raising my hands in supplication, “that not one
single time have I
been able to see the results of talking about you?” There was
the English convert to
Islam, and the general, and all the servants who had fled, and
the hundreds of
times I had talked with members of my family and with friends
—not one of these
times bore visible fruit. “It’s so puzzling, Lord! I just don’t
understand why You
aren’t using me.”
As I prayed the sensation of Christ’s Presence grew ever
stronger in that room.
He seemed to fill the atmosphere with strength and comfort. I
heard in my heart
the distinct suggestion, “Bilquis, I have only one question to
ask you. Think back
over those times when you have talked with your friends, and
with your family.
Think back over the times you have accepted people who have
come to argue.
Have you felt My Presence during those visits?”
“Yes, Lord. Yes, indeed I have.”
“My glory was there?”
“Yes, Lord.”
“Then that’s all you need. It is so often this way with friends.
And family. The re-
sults are not your problem. All you have to worry about is
obedience. Seek My
Presence, not results.”

So I continued on my course. The odd thing is that it became
an increasingly
stimulating and invigorating time. Once the Lord had taken my
eyes off the “re-

sults" and turned them to His Presence, I could enjoy meeting friend after friend, relative after relative, without the slightest feeling of frustration. I learned to take advantage of opportunities. Whether the conversation was on politics or clothes, I would ask God to prompt a question that would give me an opening. For example, once when I was talking to a niece, the conversation drifted to my former husband, who was now Pakistan's ambassador to Japan. "What if Uncle Khalid came to your house?" she smiled, lifting an eyebrow. I looked at her directly. "I would welcome him. I would serve him tea." My niece looked at me incredulously. "I have forgiven him," I continued. "And I hope that he has forgiven me for all that I did that hurt him." "How can you forgive that way!" My niece knew that the breakup had been most difficult. I explained that I certainly could not forgive in my own strength. I had asked Jesus to help me. "You know," I said, "Jesus invited us all to come to Him with our burdens. Jesus took my burden of hate from me." My niece sat quietly for a while. "Well," she said, "that is a Christianity I have not heard about. If you're going to talk like that, I'll be one of the first to come and learn about your Jesus." Even here I was disappointed. I had high hopes and believed that indeed my niece might return to the subject, but she never did. I did have times when the glory left me during this period. It always occurred in the same fashion. I would slip into Satan's trap of convincing me that I sounded pretty good! My arguments were really quite profound! One day for instance a friend asked me, "Why do you have to be so exclusive?"

You'll have to admit that we all worship the same God, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Jew. We may call Him by different names and approach Him from different directions, but in the end it's the same God." "You mean He is like a mountaintop to which different paths lead?"

He settled back, balancing his cup of tea, and nodded. And then I flew to the attack.

"Well," I said, "He may be a mountaintop but there is only one path to Him, through Jesus Christ. The Lord said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' Not just a way," I added sharply, "but the way."

My friend put down his cup of tea, grimaced and shook his head. "Bilquis," he said, "did anyone ever tell you that you still come across as haughty?"

And instantly I knew that the man sitting in front of me was speaking for God.

My arguments were right. They were biblical and sound. But the Spirit had left.

Bilquis was right. Bilquis was stating truth. Quickly I said a prayer of repentance and asked the Lord to take over.

"I'm sorry," I laughed. "If I come across as smug because I'm a Christian, then

I'm not acting as Christ would want. The more I learn about Christ, the more I need correcting. The Lord has so much to teach me and I know He is speaking right now through you."

My visitor left, perhaps closer to the Lord, perhaps not. I doubt that I shall ever

know. But I do know that I was, step by painful step, learning to listen and to obey.

And then one night I had another one of those frightening experiences that came

only after I had become a Christian. I was in my room preparing for bed when I

suddenly felt a powerful presence of evil at my bedroom window. Instantly my mind turned to my Protector and I was warned from going near the window. I dropped to the floor in prayer, asking my Lord to cover me as a mother hen covers her chicks and I felt the strong cloak of His protection. When I arose, the presence at the window was gone.

The next morning, I drove over to the Mitchells. The sun shone brightly on their street but I was still shaking inside. Yet, as I walked up to their door, I felt hesitant about mentioning what happened to me for fear they wouldn't understand.

At the door, Synnøve hugged me, then stepped back, her gray eyes questioning me.

"What's wrong, Bilquis?" she asked.

"Well," I ventured, "why do frightening things keep happening after one becomes a Christian?"

She ushered me into the living room where we sat down.

"I don't really know what you mean," she said, puzzled. "Has someone threatened you?"

"Not someone," I answered, "something."

"Oh?" she said, and arose and got her Bible. "Here," she said, sitting down and flipping through its pages, "in Ephesians 6 it speaks about that kind of thing." She read, "We are up against the unseen power that controls this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil."

She looked up at me.

"That must be it," I said, telling her something about what happened that night.

She listened thoughtfully, and then said, "Why don't you talk to the Olds about it?"

"Well," I said, giving a nervous laugh, "I don't know if I want to

even talk about it
anymore.”

And that’s how I felt at the beginning of our get-together with
the Olds that

evening. I decided not to bring it up. I’d simply make a fool of
myself, I thought. It

was probably just my imagination.

However, as I sat talking with Marie on a sofa before the fire, I
couldn’t help

mentioning it. I tried to sound lighthearted.

“The strangest thing happened to me last night, Marie,” I said.

“I had the most

frightening experience and I can’t explain it.”

Ken, in his usual relaxed manner, had been sitting in a window
seat behind us,

reading a book. Hearing me, he laid his book down, looked up
and sensing my

reluctance to talk about it, he, in his own quiet way, gently
drew me into explaining

the whole episode.

When I finished, I tried to laugh. “And then again,” I said

lightly, “I may have had

too much curry at dinner last evening!”

“Don’t minimize the things the Lord will bring you through,” he
said quietly.

“Supernatural things do happen.” He walked around the sofa
and sat in a chair fac-

ing us. His face was serious.

He explained the supernatural presence of evil and how God
can allow it to

come upon a person as a test. As an example, Ken pointed out
in the Old Testa-

ment how God permitted Satan to attack Job and how He
allowed the Evil One to

tempt Christ in the wilderness. Both of these, Ken pointed out,
were tests. And in

each case, he added, Satan’s intended victim emerged
victorious because of his

outspoken faith in God. I couldn’t help remembering the attack
I suffered the sec-

ond night before my baptism.

Slowly the learning continued. But what I did not know as I gratefully considered Ken's comforting teaching, was that the Lord had already started a process that was to leave me more and more alone, yet not lonely; more and more cut off from my family, yet part of a great, supportive family; more and more cut off from the roots which meant so much to me in Wah, yet with deepening roots in the new City. God was preparing for us in heaven. It was because of these upcoming tests of endurance that He had been placing me, time after time, in situations where I had to depend solely on Him.

11

Winds of Change

The weaning process began one Sunday a few weeks later, during our regular prayer meeting. I thought that both the Olds and the Mitchells seemed unusually somber that evening. "What's wrong?" I asked as we walked into the Olds' drawing room. Ken leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. "Marie and I are leaving on a year's furlough," he said abruptly. My first reaction was panic at the thought of abandonment. What would I ever do without the Olds! Of course I would still have the Mitchells, but I depended on both families, together, to be my support. The Mitchells had brought me into my first contact with Jesus; the Olds had walked closely with me. Was this just a beginning? How long before I lost both families? Marie must have read my heart, for she stepped over and took my hand. Tears filled her eyes as she spoke. "My dear," Marie said, "you must realize that it will always be

this way. Those we
love will always be leaving. Only Jesus stays with you forever.”
Ken now joined his wife at my side.
“There’s another thing, Bilquis,” Ken said. “You can be sure the
Lord never leads
you out of a safe situation unless He has a purpose. Because of
that, you can start
rejoicing now, even in the midst of the hurt.”
We had only a few weeks more together, the Olds, the
Mitchells and I. The
departure date grew closer, carrying with it a sense of doom.
We all tried to be
faith-filled about the vacuum that would be created by Ken and
Marie’s leaving but
it was play-acting, not at all real.
It was a sad day when the Mitchells and I and others in our
small Christian
group went to the Olds’ house for a good-bye send-off. We did
our best even at
this last moment to make it a celebration, but our hearts were
heavy. We tried to
see the moment as a change not to “let them go” but to “send
them out.”
It was a brave show. But in our hearts, as we saw the Olds’
heavily-loaded auto-
mobile lumber off toward the Grand Trunk Road, it seemed to
us all that life could
never again be as rich.
As I drove back to my own home that day I had a strange
sensation of being on
my own now, alone in a hostile community. How ridiculous. The
Mitchells were
still in Wah, after all!

The weaning process took a new and unexpected turn late one
morning, some
months after the Olds left, when Dr. Daniel Baksh phoned me.
He said he and Dr.
Stanley Mooneyham, representing a group called World Vision,
with headquarters
in California, U.S.A., would like to visit me. I had never heard

of this organization
but my doors were open to anyone, even people who were
curious to see what a
Muslim-turned-Christian looked like.
Both arrived a few days later. When we finished dinner, Dr.
Mooneyham began
to speak and it was clear that he was no curiosity-seeker. He
was interested in my
conversion, all right, but I sensed that he would have been
equally interested in the
conversion of my gardener. As we sipped tea, he came to the
point.
"Will you come to Singapore, Madame Sheikh," Dr. Mooneyham
asked, "to tes-
tify for the Lord?"
"Singapore?"
"Billy Graham is arranging a large conference there called
Christ Seeks Asia. It
will be for Asian Christians of all kinds—Indonesians, Japanese,
Indians, Koreans,
Chinese, Pakistanis. Your testimony will be an inspiration to
us."
It didn't sound right. I had enough to do right there in Wah
without taking off for
other parts of the world.
"Well," I said, "I'll pray about it."
"Please do!" Dr. Mooneyham said and then shortly he bid me
good-bye.
Long after Dr. Mooneyham left, I sat in the drawing room
thinking and praying,
as I had promised, about the invitation. One side of me said
that I should take
advantage of the opportunity. Another side of me said I should
not even think of it.
And then an idea occurred to me.
My passport. Of course. It was just about to expire. It would
have to be renewed
if I were to go to Singapore. At that time in Pakistan there was
much red tape in-
volving passports. The situation was impossible. Some people
sent their passports

in for renewal and never got them back.
Why not let this situation act as a voice for the Lord? If He wanted me to go, He would take care of this passport detail.
That very afternoon I filled out the necessary information and posted the passport to the proper officials. As I slipped it in the mailbox I had very little doubt that this would be my "No" to the Singapore trip.
A week later an official-looking government envelope came in the mail.
"Hmm," I smiled, "this will be the first step in getting my renewal, some more forms to fill out. And so it will go on for months."
I opened the envelope.
There, all renewed and officially stamped, was my passport. So it was, a few months later, that I said good-bye to five-year-old Mahmud, leaving him with Tooni and drove down to Lahore. There I had a short visit with my son, Khalid, before going on to Karachi where I would board the jet for Singapore.
Although it was now 1968 and a year and a half had passed since the Lord met me, Khalid was much like the rest of my family, now showing little interest in my discovery. I suspected that he considered me, at 55, embarked on a strange kind of trip. But I was to be respected as his mother, and we had an enjoyable visit.
Later as I boarded the jet in Karachi and considered the project I was just now undertaking, I had the impression that Khalid was right. What in the world was I doing on this airplane headed for Singapore! There were a lot of Christians aboard and I wasn't too sure I liked what I saw. I shrank from their exuberance. They were singing Gospel songs, shouting back and forth to each other across the aisles, sometimes raising their hands and crying, "Praise the Lord!" I

was embarrassed. I found myself muttering that if this was what it meant to travel in Christian circles, I wasn't interested. What made the moment worse was that, for reasons that I could not define, I felt this trip held a personal significance beyond the conference in Singapore. It was as if the trip were prophetic, foretelling the type of life I would be called upon to lead. "Oh no, Lord," I said to myself. "You must be playing with me!" Prophetic in what sense? That I was going to have to spend a lot of time among extroverts, traveling in jet airplanes? Back in Wah I was just getting comfortable in my role as a Christian, but that was in a provincial village. There I was in control, at least. Christianity to me was a very private joy, to be shared on my own terms. I definitely did not like the idea of parading myself before hundreds, perhaps thousands, of strangers. As the plane took off I stared out of the window, watching Pakistan fall away below me into the mist. Even though I knew that I would be coming back within just a few days, something warned me that in a very real sense this was a beginning. Although I would return to my home in the physical sense, in another sense I would never come back. This—this group of Christians on an airplane—was my home now. What could I possibly mean by that! The idea appalled me. From the Singapore airport we went straight to the conference hall where the meetings were already in progress. And suddenly, quite to my surprise, I found that I was having a very different reaction to this group of assembled Christians.

There were thousands of men and women in the conference hall, the largest number of Christian people I had ever seen gathered in one place. As I walked into the hall, everyone was singing "How Great Thou Art." I felt the familiar Presence of God's Spirit and had never known it to be so palpitating. Almost instantly I wanted to cry, not out of sadness but out of joy. Never before had I seen such a large crowd of people praising the Lord. I could hardly grasp it. So many people, from so many countries! Different races, different dress! Galleries of praising Christians seeming to rise forever. Now this was different! Not at all like the group of people on the airplane. I then realized what I had been experiencing on the plane. Everything was suddenly very clear. Those people on the jetliner had been shy, nervous, perhaps even afraid. Afraid of the newness, afraid of flying. They were no more moving in the Spirit at that time than I was when I scolded one of the servants or reacted violently to an uncle when he tried to pressure me back into Islam. The problem had been their language. Christian talk fooled me. I should have recognized it as Christianese. But here in this conference center it was different. Socializing was over, worship had begun. If the prophecy I had felt meant being with groups like this, that I could appreciate and accept. One thing still bothered me. Was I really supposed to stand up in front of these thousands of people to talk? It was one thing to speak about my experiences to people I knew personally in Wah. But here? With all these strange-looking people

from so many different continents? I did not feel at ease. I hurried over to my hotel where I tried to settle down. I looked out the window at teeming Singapore. How different Singapore was from London and Paris. People jostled each other on the streets, hawkers sang their wares and automobiles threaded through the melee, constantly sounding horns. The very press of people seemed to overwhelm me here just as it did in the conference hall. I shuddered, thrust the curtain closed and retreated to the other end of the room where I sat down and tried to calm myself.

"O Lord," I cried, "where is Your comforting Spirit?" And suddenly I recalled a childhood experience of walking with my father through a marketplace. Father cautioned me to stay by his side but, always active, I wanted to run off. A flower display caught my attention and I ran over to it. Suddenly I realized that my father was not at my side. Panic filled me and I burst into tears. "Oh, Father," I said, "come find me and I won't ever run away from you again!" Even as I spoke, there he was, his tall slender figure coming quickly toward me through the crowd. I was with him again! All I wanted now was to stay by his side.

As I sat in the hotel room, I realized that in fact I had left my heavenly Father again. By allowing myself to become anxious, I had run off from His comforting Presence. When would I learn that I cannot worry and trust God at the same time! I relaxed in my chair and felt at peace again.

"Oh, thank You, Father," I said weeping in relief. "Please forgive me for stepping away from You. You are here, You are in that hall. I'll be all right."

A few minutes later in the hotel lobby, I felt a hand on my arm and heard a familiar voice. I looked around to see Dr. Mooneyham.

"Madame Sheikh, so good to have you here!" Dr. Mooneyham seemed happy enough to see me. "Are you still willing to speak?" It was as if he had been reading my mind.

"Don't worry about me," I said, smiling. "I'll be fine. The Lord is here."

Dr. Mooneyham just stood there, studying my face, as if making a decision about how to interpret my words. After all, I had been using Christianese too, and he wasn't going to take it at face value, possibly let it fool him as it had fooled me on the airplane. Dr. Mooneyham's eyes were reading my very soul. Then suddenly he seemed satisfied.

"Good," he said abruptly. "You're slated for tomorrow morning." He looked at his watch. "You'll have lots of prayer support."

Dr. Mooneyham had understood me correctly. The sense of peace lasted through the next morning too, when indeed I did get up in front of those thousands of people gathered in the auditorium to speak of how the Lord had found

me in such a strange way. It was not at all difficult speaking. He was with me as I

stumbled and fumbled through the talk, embracing me and encouraging me,

assuring me that He was doing the communicating and not I.

And as people sur-

rounded me in loving fellowship after my talk, it was as if I had taken the first step

in a new kind of work for the Lord.

The Lord also arranged my meeting a man who would become very important in

my life, though I didn't realize it at the time. I was introduced to Dr. Christy Wilson,

a kind gentleman who was pastor of a church in Kabul, Afghanistan, which ministered to foreign nationals. We found a rapport in the Lord's Spirit as we discussed his work.

Then, the meetings were over and I was on my way back to Wah. Once again I sensed that the whole trip had a strangely foretelling character, as if God had asked me to come with Him to Singapore so that I could learn more about a type of work He wanted me to do. Well, I said to myself, at least I'll be head-quartered in Wah. Perhaps I wouldn't mind too much, going out on an occasional trip from my comfortable and secure ancestral home.

But as the car turned off the Grand Trunk Road toward our house in the trees, I had no way of knowing that the weaning process was going to shatter more of that security.

12

A Time for Sowing

The next separation step came in the sad news that the Mitchells were leaving on furlough. It would be some time before they would return to Pakistan.

It was almost two years after Singapore. I was sitting in the Mitchells' living room with our small band of Christian professional men and women from the area. It was a sad occasion, the final get-together before David and Synnøve left. I could not help thinking of the first time I had come to this same low-verandaed house as a hesitant seeker. So much had happened since then. I looked at the faces of these two who had been so close to me in my

introduction to Christ:

David and Synnøve who had prayed for me so consistently.

"I'm going to miss you terribly, you know that," I said as we all stood on the small lawn in front of the Mitchells' house. "How will I ever get along without your fellowship?"

"Maybe the Lord is teaching you to get along without it," said Synnøve. "He's always stretching us, you know, Bilquis, until we don't have a safe handhold left except Him."

It sounded good, but I still didn't like being stretched and told Synnøve as

much. She just laughed. "Of course you don't, dear Bilquis.

Who ever wants to

leave the safety of a womb? But adventure lies ahead!"

Synnøve got into their car and closed the door. One more embrace through the

window and suddenly the Mitchells' car was rolling dustily

away, away from the

forlorn whitewashed buildings that had been officers' quarters during the war.

Their car disappeared around the corner. Adventure, indeed!

Here I was a lone-

some Christian in a Muslim town. Would I be able to make it alone?

Several weeks passed, during which time, frankly, it was hard for me to sense the

adventure Synnøve promised, or the direction and purpose that Ken Old had fore-

told when he and Marie left what seemed such a long time ago.

The Sunday

evening meeting of Christians continued, first in one home then in another of the

five of us who were left, but without the leadership of the Olds and Mitchells, the

meetings seemed to flounder.

Then one night after a listless meeting an idea struck me. Were we making a

mistake trying to do things exactly as the Mitchells and the

Olds had done? Our little group was surely going to atrophy if we didn't get some new blood in our midst. What would happen—and I felt my pulse quicken just at the thought—what would happen if we asked people to join the fellowship who were not professionals—not doctors and engineers and missionaries? Suppose we asked Christians and non-Christians alike, the sweepers, the lower classes, to join in fellowship. Perhaps in my own home since it was large and convenient. When I suggested the idea to our fellowship there was some initial resistance, then skeptical agreement. We decided to go ahead. Through direct invitations and through the grapevine also, I passed word along that a Christian evening would be held at my house Sunday night. I was surprised at how many people turned up. Most were from Rawalpindi where word had traveled. And, just as I hoped, not all were Christians either. Many were simply hungry to find out more about the Christian God. With those of us from the original group as leaders, we sang and prayed and tried to do what we could to minister to the individual needs of the maids and day laborers and schoolteachers and business people who also came to the house. Soon there was a fresh feeling to the Sunday fellowship. The responsibility was awesome. I and the others who were leaders in this small group spent hours on our knees, hours close to the Lord and the Word, trying to be sure that in no smallest way did we diverge from the direction He wished us to take. All of a sudden the "result-less" period I had been experiencing was reversed. I was able to see actual

conversions. The first to come to the Lord was a young widow. She cried her hurt and lonesomeness out and then asked the Lord in. It was extraordinary to see the transformation in her personality, from a gloomy, defenseless creature to a hope-filled child of God. Shortly a mechanic from a nearby garage came into the Lord's Kingdom, then a file clerk, then a sweeper. And all in my own home. I felt honored indeed, although I kept wondering when I would start to hear from the family about this smudge on our reputation. But no one complained. Not yet, anyhow. It was as if the family didn't want to admit what was happening. If opposition to my slowly evolving Christian life was lessening from my family, it was still coming from within me at times. I was yet a very private person, possessive, counting my land and garden my own. That summer after the Mitchells left, children from the village (perhaps encouraged by reports of a change in my personality) began coming right onto my property to climb the berry tree (a wild plum) and help themselves to its fruit. The intrusion was bad enough, but when their shouts and squeals interrupted my rest time, I leaned out of my window and ordered the gardener to chase the children away. That very day I had the gardener cut the tree down. That would solve the problem permanently! As soon as the tree was destroyed I realized what I had done. With the tree gone, so was the joy and peace of the Lord's Presence. For a long time I stood in my window staring at the empty place where it had been. How I wished now that the tree were still there so that I could hear the joyful shouts of the

children. I realized what the true Bilquis Sheikh was like. All over again I knew that in my own natural self I would never be different. It was only through the Lord, through His grace, that any change could ever take place.

"O Lord," I said, "let me come back into Your Presence again, please!" There was only one thing to do. Scattered throughout my garden were loquat trees heavy with fruit. The very next day I issued an open invitation to the village children to come and enjoy themselves! And they did too. Even though I'm sure they tried to be careful, branches were broken, flowers trod upon.

"I think I see what You're doing, Lord," I said one afternoon after the children had gone home, and I was surveying the damage. "You found the garden itself to be a place that stood between us. You are weaning me even from the garden!

You've taken it away to give to others. But look how they were enjoying it! It's Your garden. I give it up to them with great pleasure. Thank You for using this to bring me back into Your comforting Self."

He did return too. Until, that is, I once again needed a pruning. This time it wasn't the garden, it was my precious rest.

One cold November afternoon I was resting when Mahmud slipped into my room. He was growing up and his good-humored features foretold a handsome young-man-to-be. But now his face was concerned.

"Mum, there's a woman outside who wants to see you. She's got a baby in her arms."

I lifted my head. "Mahmud," I said, forgetting my own instruction to Nur-jan and Raisham, "you're eight years old now! You know that I don't want to see anyone at

this time of day."

Mahmud had hardly left the room before the thought struck me: What would the Lord have done? And, of course, I knew what He would have done. He would have gone to the woman immediately, even if it were the middle of the night.

I called to Mahmud, who had not gone far enough to miss hearing me. Once again he stuck his brown face through the door.

"Mahmud," I said, "what does the woman want?"

"I think her baby is sick," Mahmud said, coming now into the room. I could see the concern in his eyes.

"Well, bring her to the entrance then," I directed as I prepared to get up from my bed.

In a moment I joined Mahmud, the woman and her child. The woman was dressed in the coarse, baggy clothes of a peasant. She might have been the baby's grandmother. She had a wizened face, shrunken shoulders and her clothes sagged around a thin frame. Only when she lifted her face and stared at me with deep brown eyes could I see that she herself was little more than a child.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, my heart melting.

"I heard about you in my village, and I walked here."

The place she mentioned was twelve miles away. No wonder the poor thing looked so tired. I sent servants for tea and biscuits. I wondered if she were still nursing the baby; in some villages mothers nurse their children up to three years of age. The baby's eyes stared listlessly, its tiny mouth still. I laid hands on the child's forehead to pray for him; it was hot and dry. As I laid hands on the mother's head to pray, I could feel generations of my family wincing. My heart

went out to these little ones, the mother and the child, as I asked God for healing in the name of Jesus. When the maid came I told her also to bring some vitamins for the mother. They stayed for half an hour, the mother telling me of her life with a husband who had been crippled in an accident, the new baby, not enough food. And indeed she was nursing the baby—it was the cheapest way to feed him. When the mother finally rose to go, I restrained her with a gesture. “No,” I whispered. “Not yet. We must find some way to see to it that you and the baby are taken care of.” Immediately as I said this, the old Bilquis Sheikh began to grow nervous. What if word got out to the other needy people in Wah that the Begum Sahib in the big garden provided a soft touch? Wouldn’t we be swamped with lines of other skinny, emaciated, sickly, desperate people? But even as my heart whispered this question, I knew that I had no choice. Either I had meant it or I had not meant it when I gave myself and all that I possessed to the Lord.

“. . . and, of course, your husband needs attention too. Let’s get you all to the hospital. And let’s get some decent food into your bodies. Then, if your husband still can’t find work, let me know.”

That’s all there was to the visit. I made arrangements for the hospital to bill me and waited. But the woman never returned. I was a little surprised. When I asked the servants if they knew what had happened to her, they— as usual—had the answer. She and the baby and her husband had indeed gone to the hospital, and now they were all better. The husband had work. My ego bridled at first at the ungrate-

fulness of this woman for not returning to give thanks, but the Lord checked me.

"Is that why you helped her? So that you could be thanked? I thought thanksgiving was supposed to go to Me!"

And of course He was right. I went back in my mind to the place where I first felt that I had taken care of this woman. Then I asked the Lord to forgive me, and never to allow me to fall into that trap again.

"Lord," I sighed, "Your arm must be tired from picking me up so often."

It seemed through those days that I would have little moments of success in the job of living close to the Lord, only to be brought back to earth quickly with re-

sounding failure. I wondered if this were the pattern usually followed in the Christian life. Since I had no one to talk to then, I had to carry these questions secretly.

One morning while Nur-jan was administering my toilette a redbird fluttered to the windowsill. "Oh!" I exclaimed, "look at what the Lord has sent us this morning!"

There was silence as Nur-jan quietly went on brushing my hair. I was a bit surprised; Nur-jan was normally so talkative. Then she observed shyly, "Begum Sahib, do you know that when you start talking of the Lord your whole appearance changes?"

That afternoon I placed an order for several more Bibles at the Christian bookshop in Islamabad. They were a special kind of Bible, designed for children. I had discovered the usefulness of these Bibles with Mahmud. I discovered also that the servants around the house were picking up the brightly illustrated little book. When

the Bibles arrived, I made a special point of giving one to Nur-jan. Imagine my joy when one day she came to speak to me privately. "Begum Sahib," Nur-jan said, her plump face full of emotion, "I have something to tell you. Do you remember how you have so often told us that if we want to know this Jesus all we have to do is ask Him to come into our heart?" At this she broke into tears. "Well I did, Begum Sahib. And He did come in. I have never felt such love, ever, in my whole life!" I couldn't believe my ears. I threw my arms about the girl and embraced her. We danced a little crying waltz around the bedroom. "What an incredible piece of news, Nur-jan. Now we are three Christians—you and Raisham and I. We must celebrate!" So Raisham and Nur-jan and I all had tea together. It wasn't the first time I had drunk tea with people of the serving class. But it still gave me a slight shock. As the three of us Christians daintily sipped our drinks and nibbled at our cake together, chatting like old friends, I found my mind wandering. What had happened to the woman who had retreated to this place, to hide from wealthy society? Here she was, sitting with the maids. How my family and friends would be scandalized. How my old friends and family would wonder! I thought back to the way I used to vent my frustrations in sharp orders and outbursts of temper. If I noticed dust on a chair rung, if the servants chattered too loudly in the kitchen, if my lunch were delayed a moment, the whole household could depend on an outburst. The Lord had really been working with me, and I felt His company with great satisfaction. It was not that I wanted to become a saint. But I was

beginning to learn that my responsibility of being a representative of Jesus Christ would not allow me to do anything that would dishonor His Name. And He was also teaching me that one's actions spoke louder than words when it came to witnessing for Christ.

But then I noticed a strange thing at our evening meetings. Nur-jan was not

among those who were now joining us in my drawing room.

How odd! One day

after she had done my hair I asked her to stay behind for a moment. Wouldn't she

like, I said, to join us this Sunday?

"But Begum," Nur-jan said, startled, her face whitening, "I just cannot talk about

what happened to me, or go to a meeting. My husband is a devout Muslim. We

have four children. If I say that I have become a Christian he will just turn me out."

"But you have to declare your faith," I insisted. "There is no other way."

Nur-jan stared at me unhappily, then left the room, shaking her head and mum-

bling. I could just barely make out the words, "But it can't be done."

A few days later I was visiting the Reverend Mother Ruth whom I had come to

know at Mahmud's Catholic school. I always enjoyed talking to her. The Reverend

Mother mentioned how many people in Pakistan are secret believers.

"Secret believers!" I exclaimed. "I do not see how that is possible. If you are a

Christian, why aren't you shouting the news!"

"Well," said Mother Ruth, "look at Nicodemus."

"Nicodemus?"

"He was a secret believer. Check chapter three of the gospel of John."

I opened my Bible then and there and began to read how this Pharisee came to

Jesus late one night to find out more about His kingdom. I had often read this stirring chapter but not until then did I realize that of course Nicodemus was a secret believer.

"Perhaps at a later date Nicodemus expressed his belief openly," the Sister said.

"But as far as the Scriptures show, he was careful not to let his fellow Pharisees know."

The next day I called Nur-jan into my room and read the verses about Nicodemus to her. "I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable," I said. "In time the Lord may show you how to declare your faith. In the meanwhile, just listen carefully to His leading."

Her face brightened. Later I watched her humming happily at her work. "I hope I did the right thing, Lord," I said. "What I have to watch is that I not set myself up in judgment against anyone."

Just a few days later I discovered for myself, with new intensity, how difficult it was to become a Christian in this part of the world.

One afternoon the phone rang. It was one of my uncles, a relative who had been particularly sharp with me. Even as the family boycott began to thaw slightly, this uncle had never been in touch, never spoken. His voice on the phone was sharp.

"Bilquis?!"

"Yes."

"I heard that you are leading others astray. You are taking them from the true faith."

"Well, dear Uncle, that's a matter of opinion."

I could imagine the man's face getting flushed with the anger that showed in his voice. "It's one thing for you to make these decisions yourself.

Quite another for
others to follow. You must stop this, Bilquis."

"Uncle, I appreciate your concern, but I must remind you that
you are to run
your life and I will run my own."

The very next day when my new chauffeur was driving me
home from a visit with

Tooni, a man stood in the road and tried to stop the car. My
chauffeur knew that I
often stopped for hitchhikers. But he did not want to stop this
time.

"Please don't ask me to stop, Begum," he said in a determined
voice. He

swerved around the man, his tires squealing on the edge of the
highway.

"What do you mean?" I leaned forward in the seat. "You don't
think that man
was trying to . . . ?"

"Begum . . ."

"Yes?"

"Begum, it's just that. . . ." The man lapsed into silence, and all
my questioning

could not drag any further information out of him.

But it was just a week later that another one of my servants
slipped into my

room minutes after I had retired for my afternoon rest.

She closed the door behind her.

"I hope you will not mind," she said in a low whisper. "But I
simply must warn

you. My brother was in the mosque in Rawalpindi yesterday. A
group of young men

began talking about the damage you are doing. They kept
saying something would

have to be done. Soon. To shut you up."

The girl's voice was shaking.

"Oh, Begum Sahib," she said, "must you be so open? We are
afraid for you and
for the boy."

My heart skipped. Now it was my turn to wonder whether it
had not been best to

remain a secret believer in this land, and yes, even in this

family where Jesus was
anathema.

13

Storm Warnings

Two months passed after the report of threats against me.

Nothing occurred more

threatening than hostile glances from a few young men, and I
began to wonder if

the alarms were groundless.

Now it was Christmastime again, a few years after I had found
the Babe of Beth-

lehem. Even though some family members had been visiting
me, the warning

phone call from my uncle reminded me that relationships
within my family were

still strained and I felt it would be a good idea to have a dinner
party for my rela-

tives and friends, to see if now we could do something further
to heal the breach.

So I spent considerable time making up a guest list. Then one
evening, before

going to bed, I slipped that list into my Bible for safekeeping,
intending to have the

invitations sent out the next morning.

But that was never to take place.

For when I opened the Bible the next morning to take out the
list my eyes fell on

a passage. Incredibly, it read:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner party, don't invite your
friends or your

brothers or relations or wealthy neighbors, for the chances are
they will invite

you back, and you will be fully repaid. No, when you give a
party, invite the

poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind. That way lies real
happiness for

you. They have no means of repaying you, but you will be
repaid when good

men are rewarded—at the resurrection.

Luke 14:12

"Lord, is that Your word for me?" I wondered, holding the Bible in one hand and the guest list in the other. Sure enough, most of my relatives and neighbors and friends were well-to-do. I had told myself this was an opportunity to get Muslim and Christian together, but actually I saw that pride had been showing through. I wanted to demonstrate to my family that I still had friends among the wealthy class.

I crumpled up the list.

Instead, I did exactly what the Bible said. I made up a list of widows, orphans, unemployed and poor people of the village and then invited all of them to attend

Christmas dinner. I gave some of the invitations myself and others I passed along

through my own staff. News like this travels fast and soon my servants were bring-

ing back word that the whole village was planning to come. For a moment I had

misgivings. All those people. I thought of the white sofa covers and the carpet. Oh

well, I thought, I could put the good things out of the way and the sofas can always be cleaned.

So we started preparations. Mahmud's eight-year-old enthusiasm was infectious

as he helped me gather presents for the people who would come. We found warm

clothes for the men and boys, brightly colored garments for the young girls, rolls

of red, pink and purple cloth for the women, sweaters and shoes for the children.

The servants and I spent hours wrapping the gifts, tying the packages with silver ribbons.

One day there was a knock on the door. A group of womenfolk from Wah were

standing outside. They wanted to help. "Not for pay, Begum," their spokeswoman explained. "We just want to help you put on the dinner." Suddenly the whole celebration had become a community affair. For decoration, I asked a family of potters in the village to make lamps, the small oil pottery lamps still commonly used in that part of Pakistan. I ordered 500 of them. I had the village women come to the house, where we made wicks by twisting cotton into strands. As we worked, natural opportunities arose to talk about Christ. As we placed the lamps around the house, for instance, I told the story about the wise and foolish virgins. The food was another exciting project. Again the village women helped me prepare typical Pakistani sweets and sliced the almonds and the other delicious nuts. They put the thin strips of finely pounded silver foil on the sweetmeats as a colorful decoration. The village people began to arrive at the house on December 24 and continued coming till late in the evening. How beautiful all the lamps were, decorating every cranny, sitting cheerily along rails and sills. Mahmud had a wonderful time playing with the village children. I had never seen these children's eyes sparkle so, nor, for that matter, Mahmud's. Shouts and laughter filled the house. From time to time Mahmud would come to me with requests. "Mum," he would say, "there are five more boys standing outside; can they come in?" "Of course," I laughed, patting him on the back and feeling sure that there were more children in our house right now than lived in all of Wah. When I talked with

the villagers about how Christ had instructed us to treat each other in this way their

response was, "Did He really walk with people like us?"

"Yes," I said, "and today what we do for others, we do for Him."

Finally, after the festivities were over and I was able to slump down in a chair

without worrying about sitting on a sleeping child, I sighed in contentment to God.

"Is this what You wanted me to do?" And I seemed to hear the soft response:

"Yes." And then I noticed: I had forgotten all about the carpet and the sofas. Yet

they seemed none the worse for wear.

Many of the poor never forgot that party. About a month later, I heard through

one of the servants about a funeral in Wah. There the wife of the local mullah com-

plained loudly that I had made a mistake losing my faith.

Someone else, however,

replied, "Have you seen the Begum Sahib lately? Have you done any of the things

she has done since she became a Christian? If you want to learn anything about

God, why don't you go see her?"

But there was another side to this experience too. For I learned that there were

forces in Wah which did not take kindly to the party.

"Begum Sahib," an old retainer who worked in the garden stopped me one day.

He touched his forehead. "A minute please?"

"Of course."

"Begum Sahib Ji, there is talk in the town that you should know about. One

speaks about how the Begum has become a problem. There are those in the village

who say they will have to do something about you."

"About me?" I said. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, Begum Sahib. But I just feel you should know. . . ."

Warnings like this, sometimes coming close together,
sometimes spread
months apart, began to occur with increasing regularity over
the next year. It was
almost as if the Father were trying to prepare me for a difficult
time to come.

One day, for instance, three small boys came to our house
from the village. Later
I wondered if they were God's messengers, arriving in these
little forms. For

Mahmud came to me with news from the boys. He was
shivering and his eyes
were wide with fear.

"Mum, do you know what my friends said? They said that in the
village people
were planning to kill you. They will do it after Friday prayers."
He began sobbing.

"If you die, I will kill myself!"

What was I to do! I gathered Mahmud's eight-year-old form in
my arms, stroked
his tousled black hair and tried to comfort him. "My dear child,"
I said, "let me tell
you a story." And I recounted to him the tale of Jesus' first
sermon in Nazareth,
when the crowd became so angry and determined to stone
Him. "Mahmud," I
said, "Jesus passed through the midst of them. There wasn't a
thing anyone could
do to Jesus until and unless the Father allowed it to happen.
The same is true with
you and me. We have His perfect protection. Do you believe
that?"

"Do you mean we will never be hurt or harmed?"

"No, I don't mean that. Jesus was hurt. But only when His time
had come to suf-

fer. We do not need to live a life of constant fear that
something terrible will hap-
pen to us. For it cannot happen to us until our moment has
come. And maybe that
will never happen. We will simply have to wait and see. But in
the meantime we can

live in great confidence. Do you understand?"

Mahmud looked at me and his brown eyes softened. Suddenly he smiled,

wheeled on the spot and ran off to play, shouting happily. It was the best answer to

my question he could possibly have given.

I wish I could say that I myself felt as confident. Not that I disbelieved what I had

said to Mahmud. It was that my faith was not yet childlike. I rose and carried my

Bible out into the garden. My heart was not exactly light. How dare they try to force me from my land!

The fall weather was crisp and dry; as I slowly walked along the graveled path, I

could hear a fish splash in my little stream and the far-off call of a bird. Chrysan-

themums and other summer leftovers cheered the path. I breathed the pleasant

sparkling air. This was my land, and my people. This was my country. My family

had served it well for hundreds of years. This was my home, and I could not, would

not, leave it!

Yet events were taking place that were totally out of my control, and that did not

bode well for my stubborn determination to stay in my home.

In December 1970, four years after my conversion, Pakistan had its first national

one-man-one-vote election. It looked as if the People's Party would carry the day.

And that was not exactly good news for me. For none of my highly placed friends

were friends of this party. "Islam our Father, Democracy our Policy, Socialism our

Economy" was the new party's slogan. It was a slogan designed to appeal to the

man on the street. I know that the common ordinary Pakistani felt a new sense of

power. Was this good for me? It may have been for the new

Bilquis, but there was an inherent danger too. For nothing fires the zeal of a fanatic more than the belief that his government will back him in his exploits. My old reputation was certainly not that of a democrat; socialism did not fit the age-old traditions of our family; and Islam?—well, now I was a traitor.

I followed the events somewhat from a distance. One day, however, an old government friend of my father's arrived. Despite his despair over my new faith, he had tried to stay close to me. From time to time he would call or visit just to make sure that everything was all right.

Now he sat with me on the white sofa in my drawing room, sipping tea.

"Bilquis," he said, his voice low, "are you aware of what is happening and how it can affect you?"

"Do you mean with the Pakistan People's Party?"

"How much do you know about Zulfikar Ali Bhutto?"

"I knew him well," I said.

"Don't you read the paper? Listen to the radio?"

"No, you know I don't take time for that."

"Well, I advise that you do take time. The government situation has changed. I

doubt if you can count on him as you did on previous presidents," he added. "You

have, my dear, lost what influence you may have had in high circles. That era is over."

Half an hour later as I waved my old friend out of the driveway and returned to

call the maid to clean up, I realized that a strange thing had happened with my old

friend's visit. It was as if he had spoken for the Lord, preparing me for the fact that

my protective, influential friends were gone, bringing me one more step toward

total dependence on the Lord.

It wasn't too long before I began sensing a growing hostility. I saw it in the eyes of men as I walked in Wah. I'll never forget the change in the attitude of a minor official with whom I discussed taxes on my property. In the past he had been a servile man, bowing and touching his forehead. Now the little fellow was openly hostile. It was evident in his clipped remarks and the contemptuous way he slapped the forms down in front of me. And later as I was strolling along the road outside my house, I glimpsed a man who usually went out of his way to speak to me. Now I noticed something quite different. He caught sight of me, quickly turned his head and began to study the horizon as I passed. Inwardly, I chuckled. "Lord, don't we all behave like children!" Interestingly, the new government seemed to have little effect upon my household staff. Except for Nur-jan, who was still quietly enjoying her new walk with Jesus, and Raisham, my other Christian servant, my entire staff were faithful followers of Muhammad. Yet a real affection existed between us. More than once my Muslim servants slipped into the bedroom to plead with me. "Please, Begum Sahib Ji," they said in low voices, "if you should have to leave . . . or if you should decide to leave . . . don't worry about us. We'll find work." What a different relationship I had with my staff now than a short four years before. Dreams, too, played a remarkable role during that time. Dreams had always been a part of my Christian experience, ever since the day I first met Jesus, who came in a dream to feast at the table with me. Now these strange and mystic experiences,

such as Paul said he experienced, became even more active. One night I found myself taken out in spirit and crossing the ocean at a terrific momentum. Like the speed of light I came to what I felt was New England, though I had never been to America. I came before a house, or was it a nursing home? I floated into a room with twin beds. In one lay a middle-aged woman with a round face, clear blue eyes and a mixture of gray and white short hair. A white embossed cotton spread in a triangular pattern covered the bed. She was obviously very ill; I sensed she had cancer. A nurse sat in a chair reading. And then I saw my Lord in the corner of the room. I kneeled down before Him and asked what I should do.

"Pray for her," He said. So I went to the woman's bed and prayed fervently for her healing.

In the morning I sat at my windowsill awed by what had happened in that room across the sea. Why did Jesus ask me to pray for the woman? He was right there.

Yet He had asked me to pray for her. I was beginning to get a glimmer of a tremendous revelation. Our prayers are vital to our Lord. He works through them. I was led to the fifth chapter of James: Believing prayer will save the sick man; the Lord will restore him and any sins that he has committed will be forgiven. . . . Tremendous power is made available through a good man's earnest prayer. . . .

Thus our prayer releases this power into the person for whom we plead.

Another time I envisioned walking up a gangplank as if boarding a ship. The gangplank led into a room. Christ was standing in the room. He seemed to be giving me instructions. Then I walked back down the gangplank.

At the end of it a lady was waiting, dressed in western clothes, a skirt and jacket. She appeared to have been waiting for me. She came up to me, linked her arm in mine and started to take me way.

"Where are we going, Lord?" I asked over my shoulder. But He would not tell me.

The dream seemed to be saying that I would be going on another trip. Although this time I would be going to an unknown destination, Jesus would be watching over the journey. The dream left me in a state of preparedness so that I was not startled by the news an old friend brought me.

In March 1971, just a few months after Bhutto had taken office, I had a visit from Yaqub, an old government friend. He had been close to our family for years. In fact, when my husband was Minister, there was a time when Pakistan was in an economic decline with a serious trade imbalance. Yaqub and I had helped inaugurate a self-help program which came to be called the Simple Living Plan. The basic idea was to encourage Pakistan industries to produce our own goods, lessening the need for imports.

We had followed each other around the country helping small factories and cottage industries get started. We had encouraged local people to weave fabric and then start production of clothing. We, ourselves, had voluntarily entered an austerity program, wearing homespun garments. It was all to the good, for the Simple Living Plan was a success. As local factories began to thrive, the economic condition of Pakistan improved. Through the years since, Yaqub would occasionally visit

me to discuss politics and world affairs. He knew a good deal about our family holdings, for he had visited the many properties we had throughout Pakistan, and he knew that most of our funds were tied up in real estate. "Bilquis," he said, in a tone that was apologetic, "some friends and I have been talking and . . . er, the subject of your financial health has come up. Have you considered selling some of your land? I'm not sure how safe it is for you or your family to have all of your assets tied up in real estate, with Bhutto promising land reform."

What a thoughtful thing for Yaqub to do. And not without risk either. With the growing hostility toward the ruling class of yesterday, his government staff car outside my house could easily serve to bring criticism on his own shoulders.

"Thank you, Yaqub," I said, trying to control my voice. "But as things stand now I am determined. Nothing— nothing at all—will force me to move out!"

It was an infantile thing to say, of course. The old Bilquis with her imperious, stubborn way was showing through. Nonetheless it was an attitude that did not surprise my friend at all.

"That's the answer I expected, Bilquis," Yaqub said, stroking his mustache and laughing. "Just the same, the time may come when you may want to leave Pakistan.

If you need help . . ."

"If the time does, my good friend, I will be sure to remember your offer."

Another dream: this time from Raisham, usually so reserved.

"Oh, Begum Sheikh," my maid cried, kneeling her tall slender form by the divan

on which I sat in my bedroom that cold night I met the Lord.

"I've had a horrible

dream. Can I tell you about it?"

"Of course."

I listened closely, Raisham told me that in her dream some evil men had come into the house and were holding me prisoner. "I fought with them," she cried. "I called out 'Begum, run!' And in the dream I saw you running out of the house and escaping." The maid's dark brown eyes were moist with tears. It was I who had to comfort her. But for me this was not difficult. In the words that I spoke, I found myself listening to advice that I should take to heart. "My dear," I said, "I have been hearing much from the Lord lately about the possibility of having to flee. And this may occur. I at first refused to believe. But now I am beginning to wonder.

"It is possible," I said, lifting her chin upwards and smiling, "that I may have to go. But if I do, it will be in the Lord's timing. I am learning to accept that. Can you believe me?"

The maid was silent. Then at last she spoke, "What a wonderful way to live, Begum Sahib."

"It is indeed. It is the only way. Nothing, any longer, is in my own control."

And although I did believe everything I said, as the woman disappeared from my bedroom, I found myself not quite as in charge of my emotions as I may have sounded. Fleeing? Running away? Me?

The series of message "experiences" began to come more rapidly in the autumn of 1971. One day Nur-jan came to me breathless and taut with emotion.

"What is it, Nur-jan?" I said as she started to brush my hair, her hands trembling.

"Oh, Begum Sahib," Nur-jan sobbed, "I don't want you to be

hurt."

"Hurt by what?"

Nur-jan dried her eyes. She told me that her brother, her own brother, had been to the mosque the previous day, and that a group of men had said that at last the time had come to take action against me.

"Do you have any idea of what they meant?"

"No, Begum Sahib," Nur-jan said. "But I am afraid. Not only for you but for the boy, too."

"A nine-year-old child? They wouldn't . . ."

"Begum Sahib, this is not the country it was even five years ago," said Nur-jan

seriously, so unlike her usually bubbly self. "Please be careful."

And indeed, it wasn't but a few weeks later that it happened.

It had been such a lovely day. Autumn was in the air. The monsoon season was

over and the weather was crisp and dry. Nothing untoward had happened for days

on end and I found myself saying that, after all, we were living in a modern age. It

was 1971, not 1571. Holy wars were a thing of the past.

I went up to my room for my prayer hour.

But suddenly, without knowing why, I had the strongest urge to get Mahmud

and to rush outside to the lawn!

What a foolish thing to do. But the urge was so definite that I woke Mahmud up

from his siesta, and without explanation hurried the groggy

and protesting child

and ran outside.

The moment I stepped onto the terrace, I smelled acrid smoke.

Someone was

burning pine boughs. We had a longstanding rule that no one was allowed to burn

trash on my land. I went in search of the gardener and, when I rounded the side of

the house, was instantly filled with horror.

There, heaped against the house, was a mound of dried pine boughs, ablaze.

The crackling flames, hot and fast, raced up the side of the building, leaping high.
I screamed. The servants came running. Soon some were rushing back and forth to the streams with buckets filled with water. Others had unreeled the garden hose and were spraying the flames but our water pressure was low. For a moment it looked as if the fire was going to catch the timbers which stuck out from the end of the building under the roof. They began to smoke and smolder. There was no way to throw water that high. The only way we could keep the house from burning down was to quench the flames themselves. On we raced, against time. The servants formed a line to the stream passing buckets of water from one person to another, sloshing it over in their hurry. Everyone worked until finally the leaping flames began to be brought under control. We stood, about a dozen of us, in a circle around the fire. All of us were perspiring, all of us shaking. In another few minutes the house would have been ablaze, impossible to quench. I caught Nur-jan's eyes. She shrugged ever so slightly and nodded her head. I knew exactly what she was thinking. The threat had been carried out. I looked at the wooden roof beams, their ends charred black, and the soot stains on the white walls of my house. I thanked the Lord that nothing else had happened and shuddered to think of what could have happened if I had not been directed outside at that very moment. After the police who had come to investigate made their notes, questioned me and the staff and left, I was once again seated in my room. I picked up the Bible to

see if the Lord had anything special to say to me.

One phrase leaped off the page.

"Haste thee, escape thither; for I cannot do anything till thou be come thither"

(Genesis 19:22).

I put the book down and looked up. "All You have to do now is show me the way

You want me to leave. Will it be easy, or will it be hard?

"And above all, Lord," I said, this time with tears suddenly filling my eyes, "what

about the boy? Can he come too? You have been stripping me of everything. Does that include the child as well?"

Some time later, in May 1973, the Lord spoke to me still again through another

dream. Raisham came to me with worry written in her eyes.

"Begum Sahib," Raisham said, "is the cash box safe?"

She was referring to the portable strong box in which I kept the household cash.

"Of course it's safe," I answered. "Why?"

"Well," Raisham explained, obviously trying to control her voice, "I had a dream

last night in which you were motoring on a long trip. You had the cash box with you."

"Yes?" I said. This wasn't too unusual, since I often carried the cash box with me on trips.

"But the dream was so real," Raisham insisted. "And the sad part is that as you

were traveling, people stopped you and stole the cash box."

She trembled and once again I had to comfort her with assurance that the loss

of my money would lead me into a still closer dependence on God.

After she went back to her work I thought about that dream.

Could it be prophet-

ic? Could it be telling me that my finances would be taken from me? Would I soon

be completely on my own, hurtling into the unknown with no

means of support?

These were astonishing days. For just two months later, on a hot July day in

1973, a servant came to announce the arrival of Tooni's husband. Tooni and her

two children had come from Quetta to stay with me for a couple of weeks and her

husband had come to take her back. She had remarried in 1968 and as her hus-

band was an Army officer, they were constantly on the move as Army families all

over the world are. Mahmud continued to live with me, as in spite of my Chris-

tianity, I could give him the love and security that both his parents desired for him.

During lunch he told me that I should at least liquidate my Lahore assets as with

land reforms and change in policies nobody can predict the future.

The more I thought about it the more I felt Sher Khan's suggestion made sense.

Tooni also agreed that this was the right way to proceed and that she could accom-

pany me to Lahore and help me out with all the preliminary work. It was decided

then. Tooni, Mahmud and I would drive to Lahore and stay with Khalid, and

Raisham would accompany us. Sher Khan would take care of the younger children

and Tooni would join them at Lahore railway station on their return journey to

Quetta.

So it was that one hot morning in July 1973, the three of us found ourselves near-

ly ready for the drive to Lahore to see real estate agents about my properties. As I

stepped out of the house I was struck by the beauty of my garden. Summer flowers

were at their height and even the springs seemed to tinkle louder than usual.

"We'll be back in a few weeks," I said to the staff. Everyone

seemed to accept the idea. Everyone, that is, but Nur-jan and Raisham. Nur-jan suddenly burst into tears and rushed away. Sadly I went to my bedroom to pick up an item I forgot. When I turned, Nur-jan was standing in front of me. She took my hand, her eyes wet with tears. "God go with you, Begum Sahib Ji," she said softly. "And He with you," I answered. Nur-jan and I stood in the hall silently together, saying nothing but understanding everything. Somehow I sensed that I would never see her again—she with whom I had become so close. I squeezed her hand and whispered, "There is no one who can do my hair like you." Nur-jan put her hands to her face and rushed away from me. I was about to close the bedroom door when something stopped me. I walked back into the room and stood there. A hush settled over the white-furnished room. The morning sun flooded in from the garden window. This is where I had come to know the Lord. I turned my back on the room and on my precious garden, where I had so often known the Lord's Presence, and headed outside to the car, where Mahmud and Raisham were waiting for me.

There were people I would be extremely glad to see in Lahore. First, of course, Khalid, his wife and their teenaged daughter. Then there was the possibility of seeing the Olds. I had written that I would be coming to Lahore. Their new work was in a town some distance from Lahore, but I hoped that I could see these old friends. Lahore, as usual in July, was broiling, its ancient streets

steamed with rain from
the last monsoon downpour. As we threaded our way through
the crowded
downtown streets, a loudspeaker on a minaret above us
crackled, then broke into
the metallic voice of a muezzin's noontime prayer. Traffic
suddenly lightened as
cars and trucks pulled to the curb. Drivers climbed down to the
sidewalk, laid out
their prayer mats and began prostrating themselves.
Tooni could only stay with us for a very short time because of
Sher Khan's prior
obligations. After we got the necessary paperwork done and
had a short visit,
Khalid took us to the railroad station so that Tooni could catch
her train and meet
up with Sher Khan and the family. It was a poignant moment
at the station, more
poignant than I could understand. According to plan, Mahmud
would be seeing
his mother again in just a few days. Yet we all sensed
something unusual about the
leave-taking. Mahmud, lanky for nearly eleven, tried to hold
back the tears as he
kissed his mother. Tooni cried openly as she embraced the boy.
Suddenly I found
myself crying too and we all three hugged each other there on
the station platform.
Finally, Tooni threw her dark chestnut hair back and laughed:
"Oh, come on,
we're not having a funeral."
I smiled, kissed her again, and Mahmud and I watched her
climb aboard the
coach. As the engine tooted and the cars slowly began to leave
the station, a pang
caught my heart. I searched for Tooni's face in the coach
window. We located her
and both Mahmud and I blew kisses.
Hungrily, I fastened Tooni's face in my mind, etching it in my
memory.
The next day I spent time with the real estate men who

advised me that my property sale would take several weeks. Khalid assured us that we would be welcome as long as we wanted to stay.

The one thing that disturbed me was that I would not have spiritual fellowship. I knew now why the disciples went out two by two. Christians need each other for sustenance and counsel.

I called the Olds. How great it was to hear Marie's voice! We laughed together and cried together and prayed together on the phone. Though their schedule prevented them from coming to Lahore, they could of course put me in touch with

Christians in town. Marie mentioned especially a college professor's wife, Peggy Schlorholtz.

Strange! Why did my heart beat faster at the name?

Within minutes, Peggy and I were on the phone with each other. Within hours, she was in Khalid's drawing room. When she saw me her face broke into a smile.

"Tell me, Begum Sheikh," she said, "is it true that you met Jesus for the first time in a dream? How did you come to know the Lord?"

So there in the drawing room I told Peggy the whole story, just as it had begun

seven years before. Peggy listened intently. When I finished she took my hand and said the most amazing thing.

"I wish you would come to America with me!"

I looked at her, dumbfounded. But again my heart was racing.

"I mean it," said Peggy. "I'm leaving soon to put my son in school. I'll be in the States for four months. You could travel with me and speak to our churches there!"

She was so enthusiastic that I did not want to dampen her spirits. "Well," I said

smiling, "I do appreciate your invitation. But let me pray about it."

The next morning a maid brought a note to me. I read it and laughed. It was from Peggy. "Have you prayed yet?" I smiled, crumpled the note and did nothing. It was just too preposterous to think about. Unless . . . Suddenly the events of the recent years crowded into my mind in a momentous sweep. The dreams. The warnings. The fire. My determination to do whatever the Lord wanted—even if it meant leaving my homeland. No, I had not really committed Peggy's question to the Lord. But I did now. I placed the trip in His hands. It was difficult because I knew with a part of me which I could not understand, that if I left it would not be just for four months. It would be forever. "Lord, I will say it once again. You know how much I want to stay in my land. After all, I'm 60 years old, and that's not time to start all over again. "But," I sighed. "But . . . that is not the most important thing, is it? All that really matters is staying in Your Presence. Please help me, Lord, never to make a decision that would take me away from Your glory."

14

Flight

Odd, how after the Lord changed my mind about leaving Pakistan, sudden road-blocks emerged. One, for instance, that seemed insurmountable was a regulation that citizens of Pakistan are only allowed to take five hundred dollars out of the country. As my dependent, Mahmud could take \$250. How could Mahmud and I possibly survive for four months on \$750? This by itself seemed enough to keep

us from considering Peggy's suggestion further. Then a few days later, Peggy invited me to her home for a visit. As we chatted, Dr. Christy Wilson's name came up in the conversation. She knew him too. I was quite concerned about him since I had heard he had been ejected from Afghanistan by the Muslim government, which then had destroyed the church he had built in Kabul for foreign nationals. "Do you have any idea where he is?" I asked. "Not really," Peggy said. Just at that moment the phone rang. Peggy went to answer it. When she returned, her eyes were wide, "Do you know who that was?" she said. "It was Christy Wilson!" After we got over our startled, laughing surprise, we began to ask ourselves if this were more than coincidence. Dr. Wilson, Peggy said, was just passing through Lahore. He wanted to come out for a visit. Of course I was glad, for it would be good to catch up on news, but I had an intuitive sense that more than casual visiting was going to occur. We had a marvelous reunion at Peggy's house the next day. I brought Dr. Wilson up to date on events in Wah and in my own life. Then Peggy told him about trying to persuade me to come to the United States. He became quite enthusiastic about the idea. "There are several problems though," Peggy said. "The first is the regulation that Bilquis can take only five hundred dollars out of the country." "I wonder . . .," Dr. Wilson said, stroking his chin. "I have some friends who might. . . . Perhaps I could send a wire. . . . I know a man in California. . . ."

After a few days Peggy phoned, all excited.
"Bilquis," she shouted. "It's all arranged! Dr. Bob Pierce of Samaritan's Purse will sponsor you! Do you think you could be ready to leave in seven days?"
Seven days! Suddenly the enormity of the idea of leaving my homeland swept over me. For I still felt convinced that if I did in fact leave, it would be forever. I understood what Rudyard Kipling meant in his lines:
God gave all men all earth to love,
But, since our hearts are small,
Ordained for each one spot should prove
Beloved over all . . .
Wah . . . my garden . . . my home . . . my family. . . . Could I seriously contemplate leaving them?
Yes, I could. I could consider nothing else if I were truly convinced that this were God's will. For I knew what would happen if I deliberately disobeyed. His Presence would disappear.
Over the next 24 hours another confirmation appeared to come through. Khalid told me at supper that there was only one minor detail left to cover, then all of the real estate problems would be over.
"I think you can say quite safely, Mother," Khalid said, "that as of today you have divested yourself of the properties you wanted to sell."
Then suddenly doors slammed. Not by God, so it seemed, but by my country.
For still a regulation came in, to the effect that no Pakistani can leave the country unless all of his income taxes have been paid. Mine had been paid, but I needed a statement to that effect. I had to get an Income Tax Clearance Certificate. Only with this could I buy tickets for the United States.
Four of my seven days before departure were gone; only three were left now as

my son Khalid and I walked into the government office to get the Clearance Certificate. Khalid and I thought there would be no problems at all, since my papers were in order.

The office was on a busy street in downtown Lahore. However, when I stepped into that building, something struck me as strange. It was far too quiet for the usual bureaucratic office where clerks ran hither and yon and someone always seemed to be arguing with a staff member.

Khalid and I were the only ones in the office except for a bald-headed clerk who sat at the far end of the counter reading a magazine. Stepping up to him, I told him what I wanted.

He looked up only partially and shook his head. "Sorry," he said putting his head back down into the magazine again, "there's a strike on." "A strike?"

"Yes, Begum Sahiba," he said. "Indefinitely. No one is on duty. There's nothing anyone can do for you."

I stood staring at the man. Then I withdrew a few feet. "Oh Lord," I prayed aloud, but in such a way that only my son could hear me, "Have You closed the door? But why did You encourage me so far?"

Then a thought struck me. Had He really closed the door?

"All right, Father," I prayed. "If it is Your will that Mahmud and I go to America,

You'll have to be the one to arrange for my clearance." A strong sense of confidence filled me and I found myself addressing the clerk.

"Well, you seem to be on duty," I said. "Why can't you give me my clearance?"

The man glanced up from his magazine with a dour expression. He seemed the type who was always happy to say no.

"I told you, there's a strike on," he grunted.

"Well, then, let me see the officer in charge." One thing I had learned in my government work was that when I wanted something done, I should always go to the highest authority.

The clerk sighed, slapped down his magazine and escorted me to an office nearby. "Wait here," he grunted again, then disappeared into the office. From it I could hear a low murmur of voices, then the man emerged and motioned me in.

Khalid and I found ourselves facing a handsome middle-aged man sitting behind a scarred desk. I explained my need. He leaned back in his chair, twirling a pencil. "I'm sorry, Begum Sahiba. . . . Begum Sahiba . . . what did you say your name was?"

"Bilquis Sheikh."

"Well, I'm very sorry. There's absolutely nothing we can do during this strike. . .

." But suddenly a light of recognition flooded his eyes.

"You aren't the Begum Sheikh who organized the Simple Living Plan?"

"I am."

He slammed his fist on the table, then shot up. "Well!" he said. He drew a chair over and asked me to sit down. "I think that was the most wonderful program our country ever had."

I smiled.

Then the officer leaned across his desk in a confidential manner. "Now let's see what we can do for you."

He got me to explain precisely what the problem was and I told him that I was

supposed to be in Karachi to catch a plane for the United States in three days. The

man's face took on a resolute look. Standing up, he called out to the clerk on the

counter. "Tell that new assistant to come in here."

"I have," he said to me in a very low voice, "a temporary stenographer. He is not part of the regular work staff and isn't on strike. He can type up the certificate. I myself will put on the seal. I'm glad to help."

A few minutes later I had the precious certificate in my hand, fully executed. As I left, I confess, I waved the paper at the surprised little clerk who looked up from his magazine just long enough to see my smile and hear my "God bless you."

As we left the government office building a few minutes later, an astonished Khalid mentioned to me that it had taken only twenty minutes to complete the entire business. "That was less than it would have taken if everyone had been on duty!" he said.

My heart singing, I tried to explain to Khalid that the Lord wants our companionship. When we pray, He wants to work with us. It was the Moses' Rod Principle.

If I had just put the problem in the Lord's hands without stepping out in faith myself, I might never have gotten the clearance. I had to step out by doing everything I could. I had to ask to see the man in charge. Just as God required Moses to strike the rock with a rod, He asks us, too, to participate in the working of miracles.

Khalid seemed a bit taken aback by my enthusiasm but recovered and added with a smile: "Well, I'll say one thing, Mother. I notice that instead of 'thank you' you always say 'God bless you.' And when you say that, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

Now that all my papers were in order I wondered if I could take a quick trip back to Wah to say good-bye, for by then I was convinced that this trip would be for

more than four months. However, when I brought up the subject, Khalid said:

"Didn't you hear about the flood?"

Heavy rains had struck the portion of Pakistan between Lahore and Wah. Many

square miles of land were flooded. All traffic was snarled. The government had

taken over transportation.

My heart sank. I would not even be allowed to say goodbye.

The Lord was asking

me to make a clean break, like Lot being told not to look back.

I had planned to leave Lahore on Friday morning, two days off.

I would fly to

Karachi, the jumping-off place for the United States. Peggy and her son would

begin their trip in New Delhi. Their Pan American, New York-bound plane would

stop at Karachi, and Mahmud and I would join them on the plane there. On Thurs-

day morning, however, an unusually strong urge swept over me not to wait. My

anxiety centered around Mahmud. Surely grapevine efficiency had taken the news

to his father that we were not on a simple visit to Lahore but were on our way out

of the country. Wasn't it probable that his paternal relatives might try to take Mah-

mud away from my "corrupting" influence! Would I be stopped on some pretext or

other? A strong sense of danger spurred me.

No, I wouldn't wait. I would leave that very day. I would go to Karachi, stay with

friends, and lie low.

So that afternoon, after a flurry of packing, Mahmud and I said quick farewells to

Khalid and his family and hurried to the airport. We flew out of Lahore with a defi-

nite sense of relief. We were on our way!

Karachi was, as I remembered it, a rambling desert and seashore city nestled

against the Indian Ocean. It was a hodgepodge of the old and

new, of gangling
camels brushing against modern cars, of buzzing fly-filled
bazaars next to smart
shops offering the latest fashions. The city was so large we
would just be swal-
lowed up in it.
We were staying with friends and I was shopping downtown,
preparing for our
departure for America the next day. Suddenly a strange
oppression came over me. I
closed my eyes as I leaned against a wall for support and
prayed for my Lord's pro-
tection. I was given the strong leading that Mahmud and I
were to move to a hotel
that night. I tried to shake it off. "This is silly!" I told myself.
Then I remembered
the story of the wise men being warned in a dream to leave
early by another route.
Shortly, we were checked into the Air France Hotel at the
Karachi Airport. I took
Mahmud to the room as quickly as possible, ordered our meals
sent to us, and to-
gether we simply waited. Mahmud seemed restless. "Why do
we have to be so
secretive, Mum?" he asked.
"I just think we ought to be quiet for a little while, that's all."
That night before the flight, I lay awake in bed wondering. Why
was I so appre-
hensive? There was no real reason for it. Was I letting my
nerves take over? Was I
overreacting to a possible threat from Mahmud's father? I slept
fitfully and only for
a few hours. By two o'clock in the morning I was up and
dressed, prodded by a
strong sense of urgency. Again I felt ridiculous. It was unlike
me. The only way I
could explain it was that the hour had come for me to leave the
hotel and I was
being propelled by the Lord. I hustled a sleepy Mahmud into his
clothes, then
packed our bags and called for the bellman to pick them up.

It was three o'clock in the morning. The flight was at five. Mahmud, still sleepy-eyed, stood with me in front of the hotel waiting for the taxi that was to take us to the terminal. I looked at the waning moon and wondered, would this be the last time I would see this moon in my own country? An early morning breeze wafted a scent of jasmine, probably from a flower box, and my heart cried out, for I was afraid I would never see my garden again. Finally the taxi arrived and Mahmud and I climbed in. I prayed as we wove our way through traffic. Even at this early hour the airport avenues were busy. As cars pulled alongside at stoplights I nervously sank back a little deeper into the seat. "We're just being quiet for a little while," I quoted myself, trying to sound as reassuring to my own ears as I had to Mahmud. No, that wasn't the way. What I really needed to do was to pray. "Lord, do take away this nervousness. This nervousness is not founded in You. I cannot trust You and worry at the same time! And yet if this urgency is of You, Lord, there must be a reason and I will obey."

We pulled into the terminal and got out onto a bustling sidewalk where the rumbling thunder of jet engines and the cacophony of hundreds of voices blended in an atmosphere of urgency. My heart caught as I looked up and saw my country's flag, the star and crescent on its green background, snapping in the breeze. I would always respect that flag, my people and their Muslim faith. A porter hurried our luggage over to the check-in counter where I was grateful to see it disappear into seeming safety. We were allowed just 40 pounds of luggage each. I smiled and

thought of our
family trips on other days to the interior when thousands of
pounds of luggage
were taken for just a few week's stay and my sister and I still
cried for the clothes
that we couldn't take along.

We had an hour to wait before plane time. Keeping Mahmud
close to me, I felt it

best for us to mix in with the crowd in the terminal so we
wouldn't be noticed. But

I couldn't shake the sense of impending danger. Again I
scolded myself for need-

less worry. The Lord is in charge, I told myself. He is guiding
me out of this situ-

ation, and all I need to do is obey.

Then Mahmud asked to go to the restroom. We walked down
the hall to the

men's room. I waited in the corridor.

Suddenly the loudspeaker called out our flight.

"Pan Am flight for New York City now ready for boarding."

My heart jumped. Where was Mahmud! We must be going!

Finally the men's room door opened. No, it was a turbaned
Sikh who stepped

out.

I found myself edging to the door. What was I doing! Certainly
no woman in a

Muslim country would be caught going into a men's room even
to look for a ten-

year-old missing youngster.

Now they were calling our flight again. "Pan Am flight for New
York City is now

ready for departure. All passengers should be aboard."

Oh no! My heart cried. I had to do something. I pushed the
men's room door

back and shouted, "Mahmud!"

A little voice answered, "I'm coming, Mum."

I breathed a deep sigh and fell back limply against the wall.

Soon Mahmud came

out. "Where were you? What kept you!" I cried.

No matter. I didn't wait for an answer but grabbed the boy's
hand and ran. Now

we rushed down the long hall to the boarding gate. We found ourselves among the last passengers getting aboard.

"Wow, Mum!" cried Mahmud. "What a ship!"

What a ship indeed. The 747 airliner was huge. We were both excited. I had never seen such a big plane before.

As I was about to step aboard I hesitated for a moment, at this last touch of Pakistan's soil.

But we had to keep moving. Inside the plane, which seemed like an auditorium

to me, a stewardess directed us toward our seats. Where was Peggy? What would I

do in the States without her?

And then, there she was! Working her way up the aisle toward us. Peggy threw her arms about me.

"Oh, precious lady!" she cried. "I was so worried. I couldn't see you in the crowd at the boarding gate!"

I explained what had happened and Peggy seemed relieved.

She introduced us to

her son who was with her.

"Too bad we can't sit together," she said. "We just had to take the seats they gave us."

Frankly, it was just as well. My thoughts were not social at that time. They were

on the realization that I was leaving my homeland. I felt sad, certainly, but at the

same time complete. I couldn't understand it.

Soon Mahmud was being Mahmud. He made friends with a stewardess who

took him into the cockpit for a visit. Mahmud came back enthralled. I was pleased.

The stewardess asked us to put on our seatbelts. I looked out the window to see

the first rays of dawn spearing the eastern sky. The engines rumbled and a surge of

excitement filled me. Our ship began to lumber down the

runway. I looked behind
me but could not see Peggy.
But Mahmud's face was there, next to me. And it shone with
excitement as the
jet engines exploded into thunder at takeoff. I took Mahmud's
hand, breathed a
sigh of relief and began to pray.
"But I have such a feeling of completion! You have brought me
out of my home-
land, like Abram. Not knowing what comes next, yet complete.
Satisfied, because I
am with You." Even embarrassment over my fears and
nervousness didn't bother
me now. All I knew was that I had obeyed the Lord in every
way. And I had to admit
that I would never really know what might have happened
either to Mahmud or to
myself if I had not followed His every command and moved as
I did.
Tiny lights whisked by the windows and suddenly the rumbling
of wheels be-
neath us ceased. We were airborne! In the light of early dawn,
I could see the
shoreline of Pakistan on the Indian Ocean receding below us.
I held out my hand to Him. He was my only security. My only
joy was staying in
His Presence. As long as I could stay there I knew that I would
be living in the
glory.

"Thank You, Father," I breathed. "Thank You for letting me
travel with You."

Epilogue

After the Book

After Bilquis Sheikh moved to the United States in 1973, she
spoke all over North
America, and later in different countries of the world, sharing
what God had done
in her life. In early 1989, while living in Thousand Oaks,
California, she suffered a

severe heart attack. Her three children rushed to her side from different parts of the world—her daughter Tooni and son, Khalid, from Pakistan, and her daughter Khalida from Kenya. Since it was inadvisable for her to continue to live on her own, they persuaded her to return to her family in Pakistan to spend her later years.

In 1992 Bilquis' grandson Mahmud, whom she had adopted as her son, also returned to Pakistan and began a successful orthodontic practice in Islamabad.

April 9, 1997, was her final day here on earth and her entrance to the home prepared for her in heaven. She was buried in Murree, Rawalpindi District, in an old Christian graveyard nestled in the Himalayan Mountains. Her simple white marble tombstone is engraved with a prominent cross, underneath which is written:

Bilquis

Born 12-12-12

Died 9-4-97

Loving the Lord

In September 1999 Mahmud was tragically murdered while attempting to avert

an honor killing involving one of the servants working in his home. Mahmud is

survived by his wife and two children, a daughter and son, who continue to live in the Islamabad area.